

Unanswered Prayers
October 4, 2026
I Samuel 1:4-20, 2:1-10

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I'm walking alone on the sidewalk. I say, "Oh jeeze." I grimace. I smile. I laugh out loud. I shake my head. I realized recently that this is what I look like when I'm out walking while I've got my earbuds in, listening to a podcast. I'm outside, I'm getting exercise, and I'm listening to some of my favorite speakers discuss a topic with knowledge and humor. I am in the zone, doing my thing, loving life, and I never cared what I looked like until another walker came out of a driveway and saw me. I realized how silly it must look to others, but also how openly authentic I was being. And I wonder if that's what it's like when the priest Eli sees Hannah praying.

Of course, Hannah is not feeling joyful and free like I am on my walks. At the time of our story, she has not felt that way for a long time. Hannah is barren. And in her time, a woman's societal worth is based on her ability to produce sons. If she cannot do so, it's likely assumed that she did something to "deserve" being barren. Hannah's "failure" to produce a son is considered a moral failure, doubling the shame that is heaped on her. Not only that, but having a son is her only means of economic security should anything happen to her husband Elkanah. And Hannah can't even escape the shame and anxiety in her own home. Elkanah's second wife Peninnah, who he likely married because Hannah was producing no sons, relentlessly torments Hannah. And this antagonism has gone on for years. Hannah cannot eat; she can only cry. She is in a deep depression. And her husband is no help. Imagine you are grieving and you're being mercilessly bullied, and the one person who could speak up for you, the one person who should understand you asks, "Why are you so sad? Why can't you be happy with what you have?" That is what Hannah is dealing with: being unheard, unaffirmed, alone.

So when Hannah is praying in this public sanctuary, her surroundings are as invisible to her as she has been to those who surround her. "Her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard." She is lost in her grief and loneliness as she prays just as I can be lost in my joy and laughter with my earbuds. But apparently we both appear equally absurd to those around us. Normally, prayers would have been spoken aloud. And it appears that Eli seeks to further shame Hannah by loudly accusing her of public intoxication. There may even be other people praying there who would hear this. Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail writes, "Hannah may have lost her sense of worth, she may have lost her appetite, she may even have lost her voice, but she does not let this priest Eli take her prayers away from her." "No," she says to Eli, "I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the lord. Do not regard me as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." And Eli has to admit that her prayer is heartfelt and worthy. And he blesses her prayer. Then Hannah went home and ate and drank with Elkanah "and her countenance was sad no longer." We are told, "the Lord remembered her," and, "in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord.'"

And that's a wonderful story for Hannah. She went through all that despair and suffering and her prayers were answered. She is one in a series of barren women whose prayers are answered including Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and eventually Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. But what about those who pray and try for children only to experience a series of miscarriages; who go through hormone treatments and IVF but it just won't take; who want to adopt but can't scrounge enough money to afford it. It's easy for those of us who are parents to say, "Well, sometimes God's prayers aren't answered when or how we want." Yeah, true. But I imagine that to grieving ears that could sound like, "Why are you so sad? Why can't you be happy with what you have?" Hannah could not find the words for her deep vexation and anxiety. And sometimes we have to be ok not having the words to comfort someone who is deeply troubled. Sometimes words don't make the prayer or the answer. Presence does. What a gift the presence of a friend is who hears the words we don't say and who knows there are no words of comfort or advice that can be offered. Hannah didn't have a friend's presence like that. But she felt God's presence.

I kind of wish that Hannah's story did not end in her having a child. I think it's a little distracting. We could have cut out those last two verses of today's reading - and I almost did - and we still would have been left with goodness. "Then Hannah went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer." The title of the short devotion from which I quoted Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail is titled "Hannah Wanted a Baby but Found Her Voice." In it, McManus-Dail goes on to write, "As joyful as we know Hannah is when she gives birth to that long-awaited son, we sell her story short if we think her "happy ending" is a child. Her happy ending is baring her heart to God and knowing God hears her." Hannah's society told her she was worth less without a son, but after spending time so close with God that she didn't care what those around her thought of her, she had the confidence and courage to stand up for herself. I wonder if her relationship with Elkanah or Peninnah changed after standing up to Eli. I wonder if her relationship with the world changed after being affirmed by God when she gave her most authentic self.

The next time Hannah prays, oh boy, does she have the words! She bursts into a song of praise for her God who breaks the bows of the mighty and strengthens the feeble, who leaves those with much forlorn and those with little full. The God who raises up the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap. It is a song of political, economic, and societal shifting and equalizing and it is the song that inspires the Magnificat that Mary sings about being chosen to carry the son of God. Hannah's sung prayer includes her own experience of fertility struggles and the pain of being put down by someone who didn't struggle with that. But her son Samuel will be a great prophet and judge for all of Israel. This song is about all those who struggle with inequality, all those who are treated as being unworthy, either by individuals or by society, for their parenting status, their ethnicity, their gender, their age. Mary is still singing that song in her day, and we're still reading it and singing it today. And, also like Hannah, Mary prays by pondering things silently in her heart.

Sometimes our most authentic prayers are beyond words. Sometimes they are weeping or laughter or silence. Sometimes when we are most closely engaging with the divine we look ridiculous. Sometimes we burst into song because the joy and gratitude are so big that words alone will not suffice. Sometimes we break down into song because our laments and petitions are so heavy we need a melody to hold us up. Sometimes a prayerful song is painfully harsh because we need an appropriate way to

unleash anger, even anger at God. Sometimes our prayers are personal, sometimes they are communal. Sometimes it seems our prayers are answered, sometimes it feels like they are never answered. There is no wrong way to pray if it is authentic to you and I hope that if someone ever tells you it is wrong, you set them straight like Hannah did with Eli. When you pray - whatever you're praying for and whatever that looks like - I hope you find your voice. I hope you feel your worth. If a prayerful experience causes your countenance to be sad no longer, that's great! But if it doesn't - and it might not - I hope you don't feel like you have to act like it did. I hope that that place of prayer is a place where you can be your most authentic self and know that that's the part of you that God loves best. And I hope that gives you the strength to lovingly and faithfully engage with a beautiful, messy world filled with yet-unanswered prayers. Amen.