

Sermon #233  
1 Samuel 1:1-28  
January 28, 2018

## Praying Boldly

What is the greatest unfulfilled desire or dream in your life? What is that one thing you want to do or accomplish more than anything else, yet it feels perhaps a little out of your reach? And how does that make you feel?

Maybe it has to do with a life-long dream. Or perhaps it is a serious illness for you or a family member. Maybe it is an unsaved, backslidden family member. Maybe it is family tensions, broken or hurting relationships. Or perhaps you didn't get the job you really wanted. They hired someone who wasn't as qualified as you. (My brother unfortunately knows about that.) Or maybe it has to do with your looks. You wanted to be as handsome as Brad Pitt or as beautiful as Mariah Carey, but it just didn't work out that way. Or more seriously it could be an addiction that you just can't seem to break free from. It's something that keeps you awake at nights. It's something that grieves you deeply, leaving you deeply discouraged.

Let me introduce you to a woman in grief. Her life-long dream is unfulfilled. Shame fills every waking moment. For years it's been the same way and nothing changes. There's nowhere to go, no one to turn to. She's at the end of the line. She has no future – none whatsoever. Who is this sorrowful woman? Her name is Hanna and her story is found in 1 Samuel chapter 1. We are currently in a series of sermons on the profiles of courageous women of the OT. Last week we looked at the wise and courageous leadership of Deborah, one of the Judges of Israel. Today, we focus on Hanna. Can we identify with her grief?

### I. Hanna grieves.

#### A. Could not conceive

Hanna grieves. And why does she grieve? What is that unfulfilled dream of hers that leaves her with no future?

She is barren, unable to have children. Yes, any couple who has longed to have children but couldn't, immediately identifies with Hanna. But none of us can completely stand in her shoes, because we don't know the shame that produced in the ancient near eastern cultures. In those societies, a woman's only identity and future lay in her ability to produce children for her husband. It was a deep disgrace.

Yes, today, we experience some of the same things and yet not to the same degree. Young John and Mary attend the family reunion for the tenth year after marriage and still no children. Whispers can be heard, "Why don't they have any children yet?" That's tough. But not as tough if that is your only life. Young John and

Mary still have a life, but Hannah does not. Her close relationships do not help her either.

## B. Close relationships were broken or mishandled

Her close relationships in life include her husband Elkanah and his other wife, Peninnah. Now we are not going into the issue of polygamy (more than one wife) this morning, because the story doesn't either. Suffice it to say that a rivalry takes place between the two women just like between Jacob's two wives, Lea and Rachel. In the OT, it never turned out well for those who had more than one wife. And certainly so in this story. To add insult to injury, Hannah is kicked when she is down. Her rival wife, Peninnah, continues to provoke her because Hanna has no children and Peninnah does. It's like an athlete who has a room full of trophies continually ridiculing another athlete who has none. Peninnah stabs her rival Hanna time and time again, consistently for years. And each time Hannah is brought to tears.

Maybe her husband will help. But her husband insensitively asks, "Hannah, why are you crying? Why are you so sad? Aren't I worth more to you than ten sons?" Okay, women. You put yourselves in Hanna's place and tell us men today, would you have appreciated a response like this from your husband? No, you wouldn't. At best, he's just a clueless, ignorant male who knows no better, right? At worst, he's patronizing his wife, looking down on her with great insensitivity. But neither is acceptable. Men, we need to understand our wives' emotions. We need to sit by them in their sorrows and hold their hand and simply listen and not try to fix everything or tell them that we understand everything when we don't. I know, I've learned the hard way on this too many a time. And this is good advice for all of us when helping others through difficult times. Just simply taking time to listen and care for a hurting person goes a long way to helping them.

So Peninnah and Elkanah have been no help whatsoever, only making matters worse. What about Eli the prophet? Surely, he will be an understanding, caring person. After all, that's what priest's and shepherd figures are supposed to do, right? They are supposed to be pastoral and caring.

So, the story continues as Elkanah and Hanah go to Shilo to worship and offer sacrifices to God. Shilo is the home of the temple or more accurately the tabernacle. Eli the priest is there. And on one occasion Hanna presents herself to the Lord here at the temple. Eli was seated nearby in a chair by the door post. Hannah is deeply trouble as she cries out to the Lord. She is so intense that she prays with her lips moving, but her voice is silent. Eli immediately assumes that she is drunk and tells her so. "Sober up!" he says. Does that sound like the pastoral thing to say? When someone comes to you with a deep anxiety that they've shared only with you and you say, "Get over it." Does that work towards deeper healing and relational building? No!

Now Hannah is at the very end of her rope. Shamed by her society, ridiculed by her rival Peninnah, patronized by her husband, and misunderstood by the priest, Hanna has nowhere else and no one else to turn to. Does she give up?

No, first she defends herself to the priest. “No sir!” she says emphatically. “I’m just a very sad woman. I haven’t had any wine or beer but have been pouring out my heart to the Lord.” She tells him she is no good-for-nothing or evil woman. But rather she is praying out of her “great worry and trouble.” Here we learn another important aspect about Hanna. Yes, she is a woman who grieves and grieves deeply, but she is also a woman of prayer, and thus, a woman of God. Through her prayers, she has a relationship with God. Hannah is the first and only woman in Scripture to pray a formal, spoken prayer and have it quoted in the text.

## II. Hannah prays.

Hannah prays. Here at the temple in Shilo she prays boldly: *“Lord of heavenly forces, just look at your servant’s pain and remember me! Don’t forget your servant! Give her a boy!”*

We’ve identified with her in her grief. Now, let’s identify with her in her prayer. She prays boldly and persistently. This is not just a one-time prayer because Hannah’s back is up against the wall. Yes, God answer’s those prayers too. But Hanna’s prayers are different. She prays faithfully to God throughout with persistent, bold prayers. In those prayers, she was not afraid to make a vow. She prays that if God would give her a son, she would give him to the Lord for his entire life. Hannah commits to the Nazarite vow for her unborn, unconceived child. The Nazarite vow as found in Numbers 6, was a spiritual vow that some Jews took which included abstaining from the use of wine and grapes, not shaving one’s head, and avoiding dead bodies. All of this was to form an intimate relationship with God.

How is your prayer life today? Are you praying boldly and persistently? Are you still praying about that unfulfilled desire or that issue or problem that keeps you up at night? Don’t grow weary in well doing. Like Hanna, keep on praying. Two weeks ago, we began this year of standing boldly in the faith by emphasizing our commitment to stand firm on God’s Word. Today, as we continue in this new year, we also want to recommit to standing firm in our prayer life. Both are needed to be strong disciples of Jesus Christ.

After Hanna’s prayer, Eli tells her to “Go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you’ve asked from him” (v. 17). Finally, a positive response from someone. And better yet, a blessing to take home with her. But it’s not the priest that gets any of the credit in this story. It’s about Hannah and her relationship with God. Hanna is obedient and faithful to God, because she knows that he is a faithful God.

And just for a moment, let’s step back from Hanna’s story specifically and look at Israel’s story in general. At this point, Israel is living far from the type of people God has

called them or made them to be. At the end of the period of the judges, Israel has become corrupt, immoral, and totally chaotic. Spiritual and moral decline are everywhere. It's a long period of waiting – waiting for the right leader to lead them. They must move from Samuel to Saul and then to David, the King who would lead them in the right way. And this first book of Samuel dares to begin with a story about a woman no less, and one who is also in waiting – a time of waiting and praying.

So, Hannah returns home. But just before she leaves the temple, she tells Eli, "Please think well of me, your servant." Then she eats some food and is no longer sad. Notice that she has not received the answer to her prayers yet. Her circumstances have not changed. Her society will still look on her the same way. But she has changed. The woman of prayer is waiting patiently and confidently with a new state of mind. She's ready for whatever God has next.

### III. Hannah receives.

The story continues with Hannah returning home. God heard her prayers and gracefully gave her a child, (v. 20). And she gave this child back to God in fulfillment of her vow. In time, she has sex with her husband, Elkanah, and then a key phrase occurs, the "Lord remembered her." Hannah receives. Her bold, persistent prayers have been answered. And we learn about the God that she serves. The Lord remembered her. He remembers those who are weary and broken of heart. He was with Hannah all along. He grieved with her. He hears her deep prayers. And he rewarded her. And she named her son, Samuel, meaning "I asked the Lord for him."

So, Hannah grieves, she prays, and she receives. But there's one more thing that Hannah does as well. She gives her son back to the Lord to fulfill her promise. When the child was old enough to be weaned, she took him back to Shilo and dedicated him to the Lord. Joyfully she tells Eli, "Sir, I am the woman who stood here next to you, praying to the Lord. I prayed for this boy, and the Lord gave me what I asked from him. So now I give this boy back to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is given to the Lord" (v. 26-28). She gave back and Samuel became the next prophet of God who would lead Israel out of chaos and anoint the first two Kings, ultimately anointing David, a man after God's own heart. And they worshipped there before the Lord. The story began with worship in Shiloh, worship was done in the middle of the story at Shilo, and it concludes the story, once again at Shilo. Ultimately the story leads us from faithful Hannah to our faithful God as prayer and worship go hand in hand.

How do you relate to Hannah's story today? What about us as a church, as Belmont UMC? We are thankful and excited about all the wonderful testimonies in what God is doing in people's lives. And yet, I'm sure many of you feel as I do, that we have many unfulfilled dreams and desires yet. We want to see God do much more. We want to see our community impacted for Christ. So like Hannah, we still grieve today for the chaos in our community and our schools. So, we pray that God will use us.

We also grieve because we would like to see our church filled again every Sunday and going back to two services. With holy discontent, to use a term from Bill Hybells, we must pray to see our church grow with new life every Sunday, just like in the book of Acts.

I've told you before about the story of Jim Cymbala, who first went to pastor Brooklyn Tabernacle Church in the early 70s, when attendance was down to less than twenty people and the building was in deep need of repair. No one had been baptized in a long time. Some Sundays Jim said that even he didn't want to go to church. That's pretty bad when the pastor doesn't want to go. But what took place was one of the most amazing stories in the modern church movement. Through Jim and his wife Carol, a Hanna type experience occurred as they gave their lives and called their congregation to bold, persistent prayer. Like Hanna, Jim and Carol grieved for and with their church members and they called their people to pray. One day God spoke clearly to Jim.

*"If you and your wife will lead my people to pray and call upon my name, you will never lack for something fresh to preach. I will supply all the money that's needed, both for the church and for your family, and you will never have a building large enough to contain the crowds I will send in response."*

One by one people's lives were changed as God brought more people to himself and to their church. Later they did have to build a much bigger church. Today they have more than six thousand strong and a world-renowned Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir that ministers to people all around the world. And this all took place in a broken-down area of the city where much chaos and violence reigned. But now a way of peace is found through people who dared to stay and pray boldly and persistently, like Hanna of old. Do you believe that can fulfill our dream yet today? For Jim Cymbala it did not begin with church growth principles or the most recent fad, it all began and continues with fervent prayer, the prayer of a grieving heart.

## Conclusion

Hanna grieved. Hanna prayed. Hanna received. And Hannah gave. To stand boldly this year, we need to pray boldly. During this upcoming season of Lent, I would like for us as a church to focus on prayer for growth – for new life. During this season, we want to pray for God to grow our church. There are many hungry people in this area who need Jesus. Let's pray specifically for them to find him here. Let's stand boldly together in prayer and see what God wants to do. For all our prayer groups and ministry teams, we want to be in prayer for what God wants to do in growing this church.