

Proper 28B

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November 15, 2009

*Pouring out our Souls to God*

The days are getting shorter and the nights are growing longer. There is a chill now that hangs in the air. The fall leaves are making their descent to the ground, some willingly and others not so willingly. The earth is preparing for its long hibernation when it will lay fallow, waiting for the promise of new life to spring forth from its sleeping darkness. We see all around us the last vestiges of autumn. There is a strange beauty in this barren and vulnerable landscape. It reminds us that there are seasons in our own spiritual lives when we experience such desolation and barrenness. The darkness calls us to a place of deep stillness. There is nothing else for us to do in this season than to lay fallow and to wait with longing in our hearts for the promise of renewal. Strangely enough, such times draw us deeper into the heart of God. The barrenness gives us the gift of clarity. In its midst we become acutely aware of our powerlessness. Alone in our waiting, we reach out with a simplicity to the One who is the answer to our longing.

The story of Hannah invites us into such an experience of longing. For far too long Hannah has endured a season of barrenness. Like so many other biblical heroines before and after her, Hannah can not bear children, the sign of a woman's worth in ancient society. To add insult to injury, the other wife, Penninah has had no trouble conceiving multiple children. She cruelly taunts Hannah, reminding her over and over again of her worthlessness. Elkanah's favor of Hannah does not assuage her feelings of loss. Each year Elkanah, his two wives and children make a pilgrimage to the holy city,

Shiloh. There, families gather to worship and offer sacrifices to Yahweh. This annual journey must have been difficult for Hannah. Year after year she stood by and watched her husband offering sacrifices in the tabernacle for his offspring—a painful reminder of her own inability to provide him such a gift. Year after year she waits with this deep longing burning in her heart.

On this particular pilgrimage, Hannah does something that few, ancient women would have had the courage to do. On her own, Hannah goes to the tabernacle and presents herself to the Lord. She does not follow the rules. Instead she takes matters into her own hands. Eli, the priest, is so confounded by Hannah's prayer he assumes she is out of her mind, even accusing her of being drunk. Eugene Peterson describes this scene in this way: "To Eli, the normal way of prayer, then, is by means of ritual, incense, and animal sacrifice, a gathering of the community directed by a priest. And then Hannah shows up, without bringing a sacrifice, without asking directions from the priest, and simply prays, soaring past all the liturgical conventions of her age, boldly presenting her petition before her God without benefit of clergy. She uses her own words, her own voice, without intermediaries. Later, rabbis focus on Hannah as a model of authentic prayer, 'the prayer of the heart', which eventually replaced sacrifice altogether."

In her desolation and her despair, Hannah cries out to God. Her prayer is raw and it is vulnerable. She breaks open her heart, pouring out her soul before her God. It is an authentic prayer of the heart. And as we learn her prayer is answered. She conceives and bears a son. Samuel, however, is not just any child. Through Samuel, the great prophet, God would do a new thing among his people by ending the period of the Judges and inaugurating the monarchy.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is the daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than

words without a heart." Even if we did not know the rest of Hannah's story, even if her prayer had seemed to go unanswered, she would still be a remarkable witness. She would be a witness to us of one who with simplicity and authenticity reaches out to her God from the depths of her longing. Hannah has much to teach us. If we were to examine our own prayer lives, can we say that we come before God in our barrenness? Do we break open our hearts before God? Do we place upon the altar our deepest needs and longings? I think that sometimes we are tempted to hide behind the liturgical words, rituals and practices of prayer in order to avoid real intimacy with God. At least I know for me that often I'm afraid to be that vulnerable. It is hard to be that trusting. And yet it is there in those places of vulnerability and barrenness, stripped of all our power and self-sufficiency that we find ourselves lovingly held in the heart- the very center of God.

*In Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster tells this story, "One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, this father began sharing his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the car seat, the child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again! Prayer is a little like that," Foster concludes. "With

simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over us."

Like our sister Hannah may we come to God, not only in our times of joy and abundance, but in our times of darkness and desolation. With boldness may we reach out from the barren landscapes of our lives and share with God the deepest longings of our hearts so that we too may be gathered up into God's arms and serenaded with the love song intended for each of us.