

Our emphasis for 2009 is prayer. This is not because we don't pray or that we are not a people of prayer—we are and do, most positively. Nor is the emphasis on prayer to make us feel guilty about how, where, when or what we pray. All of us are created differently, pray differently and the Bible includes all types and styles of prayer. The emphasis is to remind us that among many things we are called to be a people of prayer. Jesus' words as he cleansed the Temple remind us of this: *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations"* (Mark 11:17). Thus, for our Lenten Journey I want us to focus on some of the Biblical prayers and how they teach us about prayer.

This morning I want us to look at two different prayers, the prayers of Hannah and of Simeon. Hannah is a desperate woman who has no place else to turn but to God. She is one of two wives of Elkanah (the favorite, she receives double of what the other wife gets – a good set up for jealousy). But, Hannah is barren. She has no children in a society where her worth is seen in her ability to produce children, especially male children. The other wife makes fun of her and often reminds her of her condition. We know that she does not want to make the yearly family trip to worship; it is a hard time for her. She is constantly reminded of her lack of children, her second place status in the eyes of the other wife because of it. *"Her rival used to provoke her severely because the Lord closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat"* (1 Sam. 1:6-7).

One year she is in such intense prayer the prophet Eli thinks she is drunk. She assures him that she is not and he responds that because of the intensity of her prayers they will be answered. Her prayer is fulfilled and Samuel is born. After he is weaned she presents him to Eli for training – she has committed him to the Lord. I like the way the NRSV gives her words: *"...therefore I have lent him to the Lord as long as he lives"* (1:28). She leaves him with Eli and returns yearly with a new set of clothing. Although she has three more sons and two daughters, it was for Samuel she prayed.

Simeon is promised that he would not die until he saw the Lord's anointed, the Messiah. He is now moved by the Holy Spirit to go to the Temple for the fulfillment of that promise, the response to his prayers. The forty days of purification for Mary have passed and Jesus is presented in the Temple as prescribed in Leviticus 12:2-8 with the offering as prescribed for the poorest. Here is where I want Paul Harvey again – I want the rest of the story. I want to know what Simeon thought as the Spirit directed him to Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Was he expecting a child? Did he know of the humble parentage? What were his thoughts as he took Jesus in his arms?

As you look at this passage do you notice the revolutionary words of Simeon? As Simeon holds Jesus he says, *"He will be a light for revelation to the Gentiles"* (2:32 NRSV). What Israel has failed to be he will be. The door is opened for the message of God to go to the whole world through this child in his arms. The world is expanding; Gentiles are a part of the story again.

I see two different types of prayer in these two. Hannah's is very personal and maybe we could say selfish. She prays out of depression. She does not want to eat. Does not want to go anywhere. Does not want to be included with the family. It is a prayer of desperation. Her success (in her eyes) as a wife is dependent on this prayer being answered. She saw herself as a failure – her life is one of misery among riches. She prays for her self, with a promise – “I will give him to the Lord”. In this instance her prayer is heard and her promise is kept.

Simeon on the other hand is a prayer for the nation. He is seeking for the silence of the ages to be broken and for God's redemption to come again on Israel. He has received a promise, perhaps now he grows old and is anxious for the fulfillment. He, as we have said, also expands the promise—this child is to bring hope not only to Israel but also to the Gentiles. It is not an easy task to take a child in your arms and see the hope and promise of the world in its life. Mary and Joseph are confused and honored by his words. He will bring hope but also pain to Mary's heart. Hard words of hope and reality.

For me, prayer challenges our faith. Samuel's sons, like Eli's, will be a disappointment and the nation will call for a king as ruler over them rather than a judge. Samuel will anoint two kings of Israel, Saul and David. Samuel will feel rejected by his people although God will assure him that they are not rejecting him but are rejecting God's leadership (I Sam. 8:7). Israel has been called to be different but they want to be like the rest of the world. I wonder if we have changed? Because of the role he plays in anointing Saul and David his life will have an impact on the scene in the Temple hundreds of years later.

Simeon will take God in his arms. His words will set the groundwork for the ministry of Jesus. He has seen the hope of Israel: God, Incarnate. He has held him in his arms, given his benediction and blessing on the life of this young child. He has accepted by faith that this is the One promised, the one who will now allow him to depart in peace having seen God's salvation. He will play only a minor role in the beginning of the life story of Jesus – but one that affirms who Jesus is and the opening of doors thought forever closed.

Today we come to this Table of the Lord. It is a celebration of what God has done, what God is doing and what God is going to do. We don't know all the answers, all the twists and turns our faith journey will take us. However, we can be assured that whatever happens our prayers will have an impact – what kind and how is up to God—but our God does hear and does respond. God only asks that we be ready to be surprised. Who knows, maybe we too one day will say, “For This I Prayed.”