

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **When you hear the word “prayer”, what is it that you think of?** Perhaps it is a mosque full of people bowing facedown on matts, pointing towards Mecca, five times a day. Perhaps it is incense burning in a Hindi temple. Perhaps it is the beads of a rosary, flicking through your thumbs. Perhaps it is a journal where fervent words to God are poured out like water on pages. Perhaps it is rocking in place as words that your mind doesn't find coherent but your heart can't help uttering spill forth from your lips. Perhaps it is hands on flesh, the warmth of sacred presence filling the space.
- B. **“Prayer” has meant a number of different things to me through the years.**
1. Growing up in my parents' mainline denominational church, prayer consisted of **statements that were read on Sundays** during the weekly worship service. Sometimes they were read by the pastor. Sometimes they were read by the congregation. The words were printed in bold in our bulletins and we were told to stand to speak them. “The Lord's Prayer” we were taught to memorize and speak every Sunday. Prayer might also be grace spoken before an important meal.
 2. That was the extent of prayer for me until I was a senior in high school, **facing the first significant decision of my life: where to go to college.** I had the good fortune of being accepted to multiple universities and I struggled to decide which school in which part of the country to land in. **Prayer was what I found myself whispering under my breath** between homework assignments, on plane trips to college visits, or laying in bed at night. In terms of belief, I was agnostic, but my heart couldn't help calling out “God, I don't know who or what you even are. I don't know if you're the God of Christianity or something else. But whoever you are, if you're real and you're there: show me where to go to school.”
 3. **Prayer was also the quiet moment**, strolling through the grounds of one particular campus when I felt a deep sense of calm, a palpable sense of sacred presence. As if something or someone was close and the closeness was good; really, really loving and good. And in that moment, I looked around me, and I saw my life, I saw my future. I felt it there. In that moment it was as if I knew as clearly as I had known anything before that this was where I needed to be. “I think there is a God,” I found myself naming, “and that God wants me to go to school here.”
 4. As I went further in exploring my spirituality, particularly within the context of Christian spaces on my college campus that described themselves as evangelical or charismatic, **prayer became meetings with others students in dorm rooms** where we asked God for help with our studies, for growth in our faith, for more direction in our future. In the context of my new Vineyard church, I was taught a whole model for praying, **“The Vineyard 5 Step Prayer Model”** that gave us tools for ministering to others with prayers for healing or prayers for guidance, usually with hands laid on the person being prayed for.
 5. And through the decades **prayer has continued to evolve for me.** It has meant different things at different times. Sometimes it has been a solitary practice. Sometimes with others. Sometimes there have been long lists of concerns to name to God, sometimes very few. At times prayer has been more an activity of the mind and at times its involved my whole body, like walking a prayer labyrinth.
 6. There have been seasons when **praying has felt natural and easy**, like talking with a best friend for hours, where the connection seems so natural you lose yourself in it and don't notice how much time has disappeared. There have been **seasons where it has felt very silent**; where I feel like I have nothing to say to God, and I'm not sure if God has anything to say to me.

7. There have been seasons where **prayer has been more mystical** - hard to describe with words; more a sense of the sacred presence than anything else. And there have been seasons when **I've longed to encounter something beyond me** and wondered if there is anything to encounter at all.
 8. In more recent years, I have found myself asking new theological questions, reading different perspectives on God and spirituality, trying to dismantle idols in my faith, and as certain beliefs or understandings are deconstructed, I'm left at times with **questions that feel hard to resolve around prayer** - what it means, how it works. And yet, even amidst my questions, prayer is also that tug in me that won't let go.
 9. **Prayer is the thing I feel at night**, after searching through articles and texts for the right story to teach on a Sunday- the right story to tackle with my community for a conversation on prayer. Prayer is that stirring in the night that calls me back to the story I've ruled out because I have too many qualms about it; too many questions that I don't know how to answer, and yet prayer is the internal noticing that for some reason I still feel drawn to ponder it. **Prayer is the hope** that even amidst all we have to deconstruct, God is with us in the recovering of what is still sacred in our midst and the building of what our faith will look like going forward.
- C. **I start with this reflection on my own journey with prayer, as we seek to engage a new series, a series I've titled "Dialogue with the Divine".**
1. It was in a Tuesday night call with folks in our community that I had invited anyone present to offer ideas for teaching topics this year. When John DeWitt threw out the idea of a series on prayer, my initial response was quite positive. It felt in line with what I was sensing to be a core priority for Haven this year. As I mentioned on Easter, I've been sensing in this community through conversations with a number of you over the last several months, **a desire to grow in spiritual connection**.
 2. In fact, it's one of three core emphases I'm suggesting we as a Haven community lean into in the near year or so. I'm articulating these **three emphases as "growing in spiritual connection", "growing in collaboration", and "growing in action"**. Growing in Spiritual connection (giving us tools to hear from God and discern with one another what Haven is called to be going forward), growing in collaboration (bringing more awareness to how we thrive as a community as we function collectively), and growing in action (helping Haven move from considering ideas to productive action together). **These are the three core emphases I've identified in recent months through conversations with all of you.** And so as we consider this first theme, "growing in spiritual connection" the topic of prayer feels like an important component.
 3. But as I've found myself engaging it as a teacher, reading books on and articles on prayer; looking at stories from our sacred texts, **it has felt more complicated**. I can't help but also be present to all the questions and ambivalences I alluded to in my introduction. Like we considered in our recent series about faith evolutions, **my relationship to prayer has been evolving**. If I'm honest, in this season prayer is something I personally feel more comfortable doing in practice than trying to explain how or why it works. Perhaps you can relate. Wherever you're at in your own relationship to prayer, I invite you to consider how we may evolve together.
- D. So let's start with the basics. I want to start by suggesting **a core foundation I hope to build this series upon: the idea that God is relational**. Whatever else we might say about the Divine, the Spirit, our Higher Power, however you want to name it, I'm going to suggest that I believe our Jesus-centered spirituality points us to experience God in relationship with us.

The Divine desires and welcomes connection with each and every one of us. If this is true, than it follows that prayer matters. You can't build a relationship without communication. You can't be connected to someone you never talk to. Prayer is communication between people and God. At it's core, conversations about prayer are about learning to meaningfully communicate with the God who wants to be in relationship with us. That's what I hope we can grow in together in this season.

1. So through this series we're going to take a brief look at a **few examples of people encountering God in prayer through the Bible**. We'll look way back in our tradition to characters throughout the Hebrew Bible, taking them chronologically and pondering how their stories shaped the tradition Jesus was a part of and how it may still shape ours.
 2. **We won't be looking at these stories for formulas** or because we expect our own experiences to exactly match what we read. These stories are ancient and the worldview they are spoken from is in many ways very different than our own. We also can acknowledge that just like no two marriages or no two friendships are exactly the same, **no two relationships with God are the same**. There might be similarities and parallels, things we can learn from other relationships to benefit our own. But ultimately, **communication is personal**, it is in part dependent on context, and is up to each of us to navigate.
 3. Our sacred stories are here to **give us inspiration, hope, and grounding as we navigate our own journey**. And so in the weeks to come, I'm going to invite us to consider a few different characters that appear throughout the Hebrew Bible. Each of their stories I think highlights a different aspect of prayer; a distinct component of dialogue with the Divine.
- II. Which brings me to our story and it's central character for today: **a woman named Hannah**.
- A. **A little background on Hannah**. Her story comes early in the narrative of the people of Israel. It's the era of the judges, which in the story of the Jewish people came after the God known as Yahweh has liberated the Hebrew slaves and brought them through forty years of wandering in the desert before taking hold of their promised land. Now they are in the land of Canaan, and they live a tribal existence. It's a volatile time of holding and defending their land, as well as learning to be a people together. After the deaths of Moses who led them out of Egypt and Joshua, who led them in conquering Canaan, they have roughly 300 years in which they have **a rotating group of leaders called judges** who settle disputes between them, oversee religious observance, and direct them in defending themselves.
 - B. The book of 1 Samuel is essentially about **the period of transition from judges to a new era in which there will be two kinds of leaders alongside one another** — the prophets, who communicate on behalf of God, and the monarchs, who rule as kings, set aside and anointed by God. The story of 1 Samuel, where Hannah appears is the story of this transition.
 1. The world in which we find Hannah is, like much of the Hebrew Bible, quite patriarchal. **Women are valued particularly for their role in childbearing**. Hannah is one of two wives to her husband Elkanah. The other wife, Peninnah, has several children but Hannah did not. She is childless, and it greatly distresses her.
 2. **Hannah's story connects with a number of stories** of women in Genesis for whom challenges with fertility and rivalries between women because of their fertility are at play, pairs of women like Sarah and Hagar as well as Leah and Rachel. And just like Kris did already this morning, I want to acknowledge all of the ways that these stories can feel challenging to us in our time when we think about the value of women's lives, of parenting, of women's reproductive health, and so on.

3. But this is the ancient story we've received - a story of this family in which one of two wives longed to have children of her own. The family was religiously observant, which meant in their time, once a year they went to a place called Shiloh, which was the spiritual center of the day. There was not yet a temple to worship in, rather there was a sort of tent, called a Tabernacle, with all of the most sacred artifacts in it - this was the most sacred place at the time. And each year Elkanah and his family would pilgrimage to Shiloh, make sacrifices and take part in a great religious festival there. And this is the background for where we pick up the story in the first chapter of first Samuel, beginning with verse 6.
- C. **6 [Hannah's] rival (Peninnah) used to aggravate her to the point of exasperation, just to irritate her, since the Lord had not enabled her to have children. 7 This is how it would go year after year. As often as she went up to the Lord's house, Peninnah would offend her in that way.**

So she cried and refused to eat. 8 Then her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why are you crying and why won't you eat? Why are you so upset? Am I not better to you than ten sons?" 9 So Hannah got up after they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh.

At the time Eli the priest was sitting in his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's sanctuary. 10 As for Hannah, she was very distressed. She prayed to the Lord and was, in fact, weeping. 11 She made a vow saying, "O Lord of Heaven's Armies, if you would truly look on the suffering of your servant, and would keep me in mind and not neglect your servant, and give your servant a male child, then I will dedicate him to the Lord all the days of his life. His hair will never be cut."

(Here she is speaking of the vow of a Nazirite which at the time was a special class of religious people who were set apart for service to God and for whom it was expected that they would abstain from certain activities, including never drinking alcohol and never cutting their hair.)

12 It turned out that she did a great deal of praying before the Lord. Meanwhile Eli was watching her mouth. 13 As for Hannah, she was speaking in her mind. Only her lips were moving; her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was a drunkard.

14 Then he said to her, "How much longer do you intend to get drunk? Put away your wine!" 15 But Hannah replied, "Not so, my lord! I am a woman under a great deal of stress. I haven't drunk wine or beer. But I have poured out my soul before the Lord. 16 Don't consider your servant a wicked woman. It's just that, to this point, I have spoken from my deep pain and anguish."

17 Eli replied, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant the request that you have asked of him." 18 She said, "May I, your servant, find favor in your sight." So the woman went her way and got something to eat. Her face no longer looked sad.

19 They got up early the next morning. Then they worshiped the Lord and returned to their home at Ramathaim. Elkanah was intimate with his wife Hannah, and the Lord

called her to mind. 20 Then Hannah became pregnant.

In the course of time she gave birth to a son. And she named him Samuel, thinking, "I asked the Lord for him."

- D. So that's our first character to consider. And again, I acknowledge the questions of cultural context here. I'll just name one place that trips me up in this story and you may be feeling too. **Core to this story seems to be an assumption by the storyteller that God is personally responsible for Hannah's infertility.** It describes her situation by saying "the Lord had not enabled her to have children". I gotta admit - I have issues with that framing. I'm not going to try to tackle exhaustively the theological issues it might bring up for us, but I do want to acknowledge it and say that again, working with a text as ancient as this, we can appreciate that the story and the worldview it comes from may take a perspective that we may or may not agree with personally, but it doesn't mean the story is without value for us. So letting those questions or qualms be there, I want to see what is essential to consider, however we understand Hannah's circumstances.
- E. What I am more interested in here than how Hannah's problem occurred or even whether or not she gets the resolution she seeks, is **what happens in the midst of it.** What happens as she dialogues with the Divine? This is why I think this story has been calling to me this week, despite my questions and concerns. Ultimately, I think Hannah's story has value for how her experience of prayer demonstrates what I think for many is a core component of how we connect with God in prayer. **You might summarize Hannah's prayer here as "The prayer for help."** The Prayer for Help. **How is this prayer for help expressed?**
1. Hannah feels desperate need. And in this story, **she brings her desperation to God.**
 - a) Hannah's experience of being a woman in the ancient world without children is **an experience of great distress.** Perhaps it's part of the reason why her husband has taken another wife, despite the fact that the story seems to indicate that her husband feels more love and affection for Hannah. Clearly the pain of her situation is magnified by the active oppression she experiences from her rival wife, and this ongoing pressure from Penninah pushes Hannah to a place of desperation.
 - b) But Hannah doesn't channel her desperation into some foolish act like some of the matriarchs who came before her. She doesn't try to her fertility into her own hands. Rather, **she brings her desperation to the most sacred place.** She waits for the annual trip to Shiloh. And then she leaves the dinner in Shiloh to visit the tabernacle, the holiest place for her on earth, and from there she passionately calls for Yahweh to help. She is pouring out her soul, she says. She speaks from deep pain and anguish.
 - c) And in the experience of prayer, something seems to happen.
 2. **Hannah experiences God to be the unique place of understanding.** She is isolated and misunderstood by everyone around her, but in God she finds the solace of being truly known. Consider how Hannah's relationship to Yahweh is different than her relationship to anyone else in the story:
 - a) The other wife, Penninah, taunts and ridicules her.
 - b) Her husband, Elkanah, is caring but he doesn't understand her grief. He thinks his love should be enough for her and can't appreciate why she still longs to be a mother.
 - c) The priest thinks she is drunk as he watches her fervently praying, moving her lips, but he can't hear her words.
 - d) All of these folks, even the ones who are well meaning, miss something with Hannah, but the Divine does not. **With God, Hannah feels heard and received.** She

experiences empathy more deeply than she can anywhere else, and **this empathy has power**. I don't know whether Hannah could have or would have known what was coming after her time of crying out for help. But it's interesting that **there is a change that comes over Hannah**, she experiences consolation, her face turns from distressed to at peace before she lies with her husband again. **That consolation comes before she conceives**. Perhaps that peace came from just the experience of being known and heard. In the prayer of help, Hannah received relief from bringing her need to the Divine and connecting with one who was bigger than her and had the capacity to hold it.

e) The relationship with God is unique. It is in that relationship alone that Hannah is fully understood.

3. **Anne Lamott** is a contemporary Bay Area writer who grew up secular but became a Christian as an adult and writes on spiritual matters. She has a book on prayer she titles with three words, each which speak to a different important prayer in her life. It's called "Help. Thanks. Wow." In the chapter on the prayer for help she describes a number of different ways that folks she knows conceive of the Divine, from thinking of God as Mount Tam, to something like the Force in Star Wars or her own version of Christian faith. And then she says this:

(1) *"But you know what? When he and my other friends and I have run out of good ideas on how to fix the unfixable, when we finally stop trying to heal our own sick, stressed minds with our sick, stressed minds, when we are truly at the end of our rope and just done, we say the same prayer. We say, "Help." We say, Help, this is really all too much, or I am going slowly crazy, or I can't do this, or I can't stop doing this, or I can't feel anything. Or, Help, he is going to leave me, or I have no life, or I hate the one I've created, or I forgot to have a life, or I forgot to pay attention as it scrolled by. Or even, Help, I hate her so much, and one of my parents is dying—or will never die. Unfortunately, we haven't even gotten to the big-ticket items yet: cancer, financial ruin, lost children, incontinence..."*

4. **"Help" is the prayer I was praying sincerely as a high school senior.** It was the prayer that led me to move to Chicago. Had I not landed there, who knows the trajectory my life would have taken. I may not have continued my journey of faith that came to life during my time there. I likely would never have met or married Jason, and so I would not have had the three kids I do. I can't say if I would have ever become a pastor, but it seems doubtful my journey would have brought me here to starting this spiritual community. It could have also been a good track of life, but it wouldn't have been this one. Engaging in that prayer of help and listening for an answer brought me here.
5. The prayer of **"help" is the heart of what I have found myself praying most honestly and openly**, even when I question what I understand about God or prayer at all, or what I hope for "help" to even look like. Sometimes, the ask is clear and I might feel like there is an answer, like that first experience, wondering where to go to school.
6. **Often times it's more muddled.** When I first heard about the masses that were found in my beloved younger sister's breast, my prayer was something like "Help. Don't let it be cancer." But the pathology reports came back that it was. Then I had a week or so of praying something like "Help. Don't let it have spread throughout her body. Don't let it be more than stage 2." And then came the word that it had spread, that it was stage 4. And yet, neither myself, nor my sister from her own spiritual framework, nor anyone else in the process who was engaging in some version of prayer around my sister's treatment could deny the palpable sense that the Divine was present. That our cries for "help" were not

just empty words bouncing off the wall, but that they landed somewhere. Even when the news was devastating, the prognosis terrifying, the treatment excruciating, that presence was there. There was power and comfort in connecting with the source of “help”. And today, four years since my sister has been in remission, the journey of finding God in the prayer for help continues.

7. **“Help” is the prayer I pray most frequently as a parent**, particularly as my kids are facing problems that are bigger than I feel equipped to solve on my own; bigger than what I can fix with a snack and a hug. Help seems to come from unexpected sources, offering words of consolation, showing love to my kids. I sense help from the Divine in my inner wisdom.
 8. **The cry for “Help” is what I feel in the midst of preparing a teaching** and wondering if I have anything meaningful to offer, in the midst. I sense help in the internal nudge to do it anyway, and be honest about my questions and my own wrestling.
 9. **Perhaps the prayer for “help” is less about any one ask** and any one prayer “answered” but it is about an ongoing posture and practice, living in a place of humility that honors our own limitations and our need for that Divine who desires connection with us.
- F. As I’ve pondered and prayed for “help” through this story of Hannah myself this week, there’s one other part of her story that has felt important to notice. **Hannah’s prayer to God for help is about more than her personal need. Hannah’s prayer for help brings her into a bigger story.**
1. This passage about Hannah ends happily with her conceiving a child. But the story is bigger than this one prayer of this one woman being answered the way she desires. **Hannah’s son Samuel plays a significant role in the story of God’s people that the Bible tells.** Samuel is the one who will be the last judge and the first prophet. The one who will anoint the first King of Israel. The one who will identify David and call him to take his place as King. David, the ancestor of Jesus, the one who laid the ground work for a Messiah that early Christians understood Jesus to fulfill. This whole line of divinely appointed leaders that Jesus is supposed to be the fulfillment of began with Samuel, with the one who’s name means “I asked God for him”. **Perhaps Hannah’s story is included in our text to remind us that actually that whole lineage began with her, the woman who asked.** The one who brought her desperation to God, who offered herself and her first born son to the purposes of the Divine, who called out for help when she needed it.
 2. In bringing her need for help to God, **Hannah moves from isolation to community.** She becomes more than a mother to Samuel, and the five other children who followed. She becomes an ancestor, one in a long line of people of faith whose stories have rippled over the millennia.
 3. In the verses after our story ends, Hannah is given the honor of singing one of **several special songs sung** by a handful of women throughout the Bible, what Bible scholars call “songs of deliverance”.
 - a) “My heart rejoices in the Lord;” she says
“in the Lord my horn is lifted high....
There is no one holy like the Lord;
there is no one besides you,
there is no Rock like our God....
The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength

Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.”

4. If that sounds familiar, it's because you've likely heard it before. When Mary in the midst of her own divine pregnancy sings her famous magnificat, her famous song of deliverance, celebrating the way that the Divine is righting the wrongs, is moving for justice, is moved by the cries of the oppressed and committed to their restoration, **she is quoting Hannah.**
- G. I can't say I understand what happens with every prayer I pray crying for help for myself or for someone else. But I can say that, like Hannah, I believe that we too, when we reach out to the Divine for help often find ourselves **moving from places of isolation to communion.** I believe that that is the core idea Jesus was pointing to when he encouraged folks to bring forward their needs, and he invited God to move in their lives in ways that connected them not only with the Divine but also with one another. I believe it's why the early church called themselves the body of Christ, understanding that somehow God's Spirit is manifest in powerful ways when we're together. **And so we cry out for help not just for ourselves but for one another.** We hold each other's needs. We say yes and amen and come close, O God, as we echo one another's cries for help. We look at the places of deep need we all feel collectively, and we call out for help together. Help for a dying planet. Help for the incessant gun violence. Help for toxic politics. Help. Help. Help.
- H. Friends, we may not understand it all. Our journeys of spiritual connection and prayer may keep evolving. But I encourage us today and in this season to come, as we grow in communicating with God, to remember Hannah, and **in our own ways to pray the prayer for help.** May we too, when we bring our desperation to the Divine, experience the power of being understood. May we too find solace in knowing our needs matter to one who is bigger than us. May we too be called into a bigger story and a community where the longing for help can be called upon and embodied together. And may, we like Hannah, in our own ways find places of deliverance, moments where we experience the blessing of the sacred with us. Moments when we sense a genuine connection with something beyond. Moments when we stand ourselves in the hope that there is no rock like our God. May it be. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What has prayer generally looked like in your own spiritual journey? Are there ways in which your understanding or practice of prayer has evolved?
2. Are there areas in your life where you have prayed the “prayer for help”? How did that impact your connection to God?
3. How might your prayers for help have connected you to a broader community? Where might you have you connected with others in their prayers for help?