

I once heard about someone who didn't want to get up for church one Sunday morning. He complained to his wife, "I'll give you two good reasons why I don't want to go to church. First, the sermons are too long and I don't get anything out of them, and second, the music is too slow."

His wife said, "Well, I'll give you one good reason why you do have to go. One—you are the preacher, so get up and get dressed."

Have you ever had one of those Sundays when you just don't feel like getting up for worship? Maybe you had a late night on Saturday. Or maybe the kids are really tired. Or you look at the scripture for the day and say to yourself, "I just don't feel like hearing that message today." Or maybe it's just been "one of those days" when nothing seems to go right.

In the story from 1 Samuel, it appears that Hannah was having "one of those days"—actually she was having "one of those years" when nothing seemed to go her way. She was a young woman who

wanted so much to have a baby, but for some reason she and her husband Elkanah were not able to produce a child. Another woman in the family kept making fun of her and teased her about her childlessness, but Elkanah would reassure Hannah of his love, reminding her that he loved her more than even ten sons.

According to the narrator of the story, Hannah may have even believed that God was preventing her from having a baby. Even in the midst of her disappointment with God, Hannah showed up at the temple for worship every week to offer prayers. She pleaded, "Look at my pain, God, and remember me. I am your servant. Let me have a baby boy, and I will dedicate him to you." Her prayer was so intense that the priest Eli thought she was drunk and told her to sober up.

Rather than getting up and leaving at such an inconsiderate remark from Eli, Hannah defended herself, "I haven't had anything to drink. I haven't been pouring out wine, but instead I am pouring

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out my heart to God about my worries and troubles.”

It would have been so easy for Hannah to get discouraged and walk away from her religion, to give up on God, the temple, Eli the priest, and the whole thing. Nothing seemed to be working, Eli seemed rude, and her prayers weren’t answered, so why even bother?

That’s the same question that 29-year-old Lily asked when she wrote in an online forum: “I don’t like going to church. I used to like going and got SO much out of it, but now, not so much. My question is: Why should I keep attending?”¹

She received the reply: “You don’t have to go to church. There. You’re off the hook. It’s not mandatory for your salvation. Plenty of people who love Jesus don’t go to church. God won’t be angry at you... So there. You can quit now. However...”

And then the writer reflected on reasons Lily might want to consider before making her decision, including the idea that churches have sometimes

adopted popular styles that get old after a while. He quotes from the book *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church*. Young adults

aren’t looking for a hipper Christianity ... We’re looking for a truer Christianity, a more authentic Christianity. Like every generation before ours and every generation after, we’re looking for Jesus—the same Jesus who can be found in the strange places He’s always been found: in bread, in wine, in baptism, in the Word, in suffering, in community, and among the least of these ... No coffee shops or fog machines required.²

In other words, young adults today—and I think all of us—are searching for worship that is authentic and real, not a fancy show that entertains. And that’s what Hannah was doing as she entered the temple for worship—she was being real. Authentic.

Did you notice the forms of prayer she used and how she felt? She was upset and crying, and then she made a promise to God: if you give me a son,

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then I will dedicate him to you. She made a bargain with God, a deal. You give me what I want, and I will give you something back in return. That may not sound like the best form of prayer, but I think we've all felt that way one time or another. "Please, God, if you heal me, I will promise to stop drinking." Or, "Please, God, let me get through this terrible mess and I will go to church on Sunday."

When we get to those desperate times in life, we reach out in honesty and try to plead with God. Although God doesn't need us to make bargains in order to hear us or love us, when we get to these desperate moments, we're being honest. Genuine. Real.

We're being human, and in being human, we're able to identify with those around us who are struggling and facing challenges in life, as did Hannah when she prayed:

For God knows what's going on.
He takes the measure of everything that happens.

The weapons of the strong are smashed to pieces,
while the weak are infused with fresh strength.
The well-fed are out begging in the streets for crusts,
while the hungry are getting second helpings.
The barren woman has a houseful of children,
while the mother of many is bereft...
He puts poor people on their feet again;
he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,
Restoring dignity and respect to their lives—
a place in the sun! (*The Message Bible*)

Generations later when Mary discovered she was expecting the baby Jesus and wasn't even married, she offered a similar prayer recited in Luke's Gospel:

⁴⁸ [God] has looked with favor
on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone
will consider me highly favored
⁴⁹ because the mighty one
has done great things for me.
Holy is his name.
⁵⁰ He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,

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who honors him as God...

⁵² He has pulled the powerful
down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry
with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed. (*The
Message Bible*)

I suspect that many of us identify with these women's honest prayers, for we've been there. We've experienced those desperate times that lead us to authentic prayer, and that's why we as a church have reached out to the community surrounding us. We know the pains of life, and we want to do more than just pray. We want to offer hope: the WOW afterschool program, our monthly Saturday morning breakfast, the playground that invites the neighborhood children. All forms of saying "we care about you" to our neighbors.

¹ www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/i-dont-going-church-why-should-i-keep-attending#btRWL4D5XGuTFgJY.99

When we are honest with our prayers, we can find comfort, even in the midst of our tragic struggles with life, as was the case with C.S. Lewis, the author of the children's books *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the movie *Shadowlands* that tells about his life, he meets with a friend after his wife, Joy, died after having been diagnosed with cancer.

His friend says to Lewis, "I know how hard you've been praying; and now God is answering your prayers."

Lewis replied, "That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me."³

May our prayers change our lives, helping us reach out with God's hope into a world that longs for a glimpse of what God is like.

² Rachel Held Evans.

³ "Prayer Changes Me," <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/prayer/>