

“WALKING THROUGH THE SHIFTS”

November 17, 2024 I Samuel 2:1-10

Any woman who has had difficulty getting pregnant, has gone through fertility doctors, tried all the drugs and procedures, watched her cycle and diet carefully, and keeps hoping in the face of great odds, knows the deep joy of finally being told she is with child. How exciting, what great news, YES! It has finally happened. How can she not cry tears of joy and want to shout from the rooftops, I am going to be a mom? The whole family celebrates with her, and rightly so.

If you understand this exuberant news, then you can understand Hannah and the song she sings in I Samuel. Now, Hannah was one of Elkanah's *two* wives who lived in the 11 century, before Israel was united under a king. Polygamy was actually a cultural pattern throughout the ancient Near East. Women could not easily provide for or protect themselves in a strict patriarchal society and given that warfare decimated the population of available men, it was often a practical economic solution. It also increased the chances of having offspring.

In chapter one of 1 Samuel, we read that there was some catty competition between Hannah and Peninnah, the co-wives. You think? The tension was compounded because Hannah was unable to bear children. Remember in that culture, bearing children was considered a blessing for women, while barrenness was a curse. Instead of being compassionate, fertile Peninnah was mocking Hannah's infertility and

basically making her life miserable. The situation left Hannah despondent, bitter, and desperate.

Now the whole family took yearly trips to the religious site at **Shiloh in order to sacrifice at the temple**. However, Hannah comes with her own agenda. She goes to the temple and prays to God, asking that if the Lord would just give her a son, she would gladly give him back to God as a priestly servant. God responded, and Hannah becomes pregnant and gives birth to Samuel a name meaning “asked of God” or “heard by God.” Samuel was the answer to all her prayers. True to her word, Hannah presented Samuel as God’s servant at the temple when he was very young.

After this, Hannah became fertile myrtle – she bears 3 more sons and two daughters. This is the last we hear of Hannah, but the birth of her first son, sets in motion the future of Israel. “**And the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord.**” This morning’s scripture lesson is Hannah’s celebration song. She praises God for what God has done for her based on who God is. What’s interesting about this musical number is it also describes what God is about to do for Israel.

I. AWARENESS OF GOD

In the 2004 film Ray, Jamie Foxx portrays the legendary soul musician Ray Charles. There is a scene where he and his future wife Bea are sitting at a lunch table. Bea asks Ray how he is able to navigate the world without sight. Ray asks her if she can hear the hummingbird at the

window, which she was completely unaware of. All the other noises and sights in the room had drowned it out. Ray teaches her to become **aware** of the world around her.

Hannah sings, “**My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in your victory.**” Hannah begins this song talking about her heart, her strength, her mouth, and her rejoicing, I mean who could blame a first mom’s expression of joy. But the sentence ends, “**your victory**” not my victory.

Hannah understands that all the things she is feeling, all the joy that fills her heart, the miraculous baby born, was the result of God’s action. She is suddenly **aware** that God has been active and present with her all along, even amongst the tears and hardship.

Father Richard Rohr reminds us that we are never separate from the love of God: We cannot attain the presence of God because we’re already *in* the presence of God. What’s absent is **awareness**. Little do we realize that God’s love is maintaining us in existence with every breath we take. As we take another breath, it means that God is choosing us now and now and now and now. We have nothing to attain or even learn. We do, however, need to **unlearn** some things.

To become aware of God’s loving presence in our lives, we must accept that human culture is in a mass hypnotic trance. We’re sleepwalkers. All great religious teachers have recognized that we

human beings do not naturally “see”; we have to be taught how. Jesus says further, **“If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light”**.

All **spiritual disciplines** have one purpose: to get **rid of illusions** so we can be more fully present to what is. These disciplines exist so that we can see what is, see who we are, and see what is happening. It is God, who is love, giving away God every moment as the reality of our life. Who we are is love, because we are created in God’s image. What is happening is God living in us, with us, and through us as our unique manifestation of love. And each one of us is a bit different because the forms of love are infinite.

Hannah sings, **“There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you, there is no Rock like our God.”** She wants us to be aware that God is Holy, without equal and unrivaled in power, and that God is rock solid as the provider of ultimate good for God’s people. Wake up to this reality or you will miss the purpose of your life.

II. THE LORD OF THE REVERSAL OF FORTUNES

I have been reading the autobiography of former United States Secretary of State, **Condoleezza Rice**. She was born an only child of her mother who was a high school science and music teacher, and a father who was high school guidance counselor, coach, and Presbyterian minister. Ms. Rice grew up in the 1950s in segregated Birmingham, Alabama. Her ancestors were sharecroppers and slaves. Her family did not have much and was limited to life within the black community. But

with the encouragement and direction of her parents, she went on to earn degrees from the University of Denver, the University of Notre Dame, in 1981 received her PhD. Ms. Rice became a teacher, a statesperson, a National Advisor, a Provost of Stanford University, etc. She came from humble beginnings but rose to shape our country. Her story reflects Hannah's words.

“The mighty are broken, but the feeble are strengthened. The filled will go hungry but the hungry will be full. The barren will have children and she who has many will cease. The poor will be rich and the rich will be poor and given seats of honor.”

Hannah is singing about a complete reversal of fortunes. She is singing the song of the marginalized, the weak, the powerless, the barren, and the ones who have no good earthly reason to hope for any kind of good future. Hannah sings not just about her own story, but the story of Israel. They too were marginalized, weak, powerless people who had no hope for a future. They were in bondage in Egypt. And like Hannah, they could do nothing to change their situation. During Hannah's life Israel was being harassed and overrun by the powerful Philistines.

And then there is a reversal of fortune. How is this even possible? **“For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.”** God intervenes. The ultimate power of the Universe acts on behalf of a people, not because they were anything great, not because

they were ultra-religious, not because they deserved it, but because God graciously acted on their behalf for his purposes. Just like God created a new life for Hannah, God created a new life for the people of Israel, and just like God created a new life for us in Jesus Christ. **“The Lord kills and brings to life; God brings down to Sheol and raises up.”**

The story of Exodus, the words of the prophets, and ministry of Jesus all proclaim a God who graciously acts on behalf of marginalized people, who reverses their fortunes, and creates a new reality we call the Kingdom of God. Our faith proclaims that we have a God who is more active in this world than we can imagine. Wake to the new reality! Once we wake up to it, then how are we to respond?

III. THE JUDGE OF THE WICKED AND THE FAITHFUL

One summer day, a petite and well-poised 92-year-old woman, who fully dressed herself, put on makeup and fashionably did her hair before 8 a.m. each morning, moved into a nursing home. Her husband of 70 years, a beloved pastor in their community, had recently passed away, making the move necessary.

After many hours of waiting patiently, she smiled sweetly when told her room was ready. As she maneuvered her walker to the elevator, her escort provided a visual description of her tiny room.

“I love it,” she stated, with the enthusiasm of an 8-year-old who’d just received a new puppy. “Mrs. Jones,” said the aide, “you haven’t seen the room, just wait.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it,” she replied.

“Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. How the room is arranged has nothing to do with whether or not I will like it ... it’s how I have arranged my mind. I have already decided to love it!”

She went on to share, **“Each morning when I wake up, I choose to be positive and work with what I have, not dwell on what I have lost. As long as my eyes open, I’ll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I’ve stored away just for this time in my life.”**

That woman is living by faith. Not by what she sees but by hope in the new day. Hannah sings, **“God will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked will perish in darkness, for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries will be shattered; The Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed.”**

Once Hannah has experienced the new life the Lord has given her, she believes in what God can do for her nation. God will guard the feet of his faithful ones. The faithful are those who trust God as the one true King, who keeps covenant with his people, who is good and just, and has the power to act. The wicked, on the other hand, are those who harm the marginalized and rely on their own strength.

Hannah has a prophetic vision of an earthly king to come who will be God’s agent to act on behalf of the poor, the hungry, the needy, and

the barren, which is the justice and well-being criteria for those in office. By the way, her newborn son Samuel, will anoint this king.

We are **a people who love to celebrate**. The birth of a baby, a graduation from college, receiving a raise, or even a touchdown. We might become like Hannah whose joy overflowed in a beautiful song. But let us reserve our greatest celebration for the God who opens our eyes to fellowship with himself, to new life for the marginalized, and calls us to faith. Don't worry if you feel powerless, God is your power and strength. Don't fret over the evils of others, God shatters their plans. Instead do good, especially among those most in need, and trust in the Most High who loves you. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, November 17, 2024

Second Scripture Lesson

I Samuel 2:1-10

2Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

2"There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

3Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

4The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

5Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

6The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

7The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts.

8He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

9"He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail.

¹⁰The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.