

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, November 17, 2024**

**“My Strength Is Exalted”  
I Samuel 2:1-10**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

This morning, the Lectionary—the schedule of readings that we usually follow here at New St. James—does something quite rare: in place of a psalm, it invites us to read an Old Testament song (or “canticle”). So this morning, we hear the Song of Hannah.

Now who is Hannah, and why is she singing? Our Old Testament Lesson fills us in on the background to this song. Hannah was not able to have children—and, for her, this was devastating; even worse, she was mocked and ridiculed for her inability to have children. So she prayed about this, promising to dedicate her child to God: “O LORD of hosts,” she prayed, “if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child” (I Samuel 1:11). Then what she hoped for and prayed for came true, and she greeted her baby as a gift from God: “the LORD remembered her,” we heard. “In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked him of the LORD’” (I Samuel 1:20).

Hannah kept her promise, and she dedicated her child to serve God in the Temple. *And then Hannah sang!* And what a song! Her song begins with praise—praising God for being unlike anyone or anything else:

“My heart exults in the LORD;  
my strength is exalted in my God,” she sings.  
“There is no Holy One like the LORD,  
no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God” (vv. 1-2).

So what makes Hannah sing in this way? What gives rise to her praise of God? Well, that seems obvious enough, right? You’ve heard the background, so the answer is: Samuel. That’s what you’d think... But then listen to what comes next:

“Talk no more so very proudly,  
let not arrogance come from your mouth;” she sings.  
“The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength” (vv. 3, 4).

Wait, what’s this about? What’s happening here? Why is Hannah singing about the “mighty” and the “feeble,” the strong and the weak?

It comes as a bit of a surprise, but this song is clearly about far more than the gift of one child; for Hannah, “this surprising birth is [far] more than a personal [...] event” (Brueggemann). See, for Hannah, the kindness of God that she experienced—this kindness revealed to her the character of God; this kindness revealed to her what God is like. As her sorrow turns to joy, she celebrates that this was the work of God—the work of the *same God* who rules over all

the world. For Hannah, God's kindness to her reverberates far beyond her own life—because she realizes that the God who has shown this kindness to her is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole world: “For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,” she sings, “and on them he has set the world” (v. 8).

In this way, her own experience of God's kindness, her own experience of God's compassion—this has global, even universal, implications...because she realizes that the God who has been kind and compassionate to her is Lord over every corner of the world. Therefore, what she experienced matters for all those who—like her—find themselves brokenhearted, empty, low, ridiculed, or belittled; the God who uplifted her can uplift them too.

So this isn't a song just about her surprising pregnancy. Hannah experienced a God who cared for her in her distress, who answered her in her despair, who uplifted her when she was rock bottom...and if *that's* what God is like, if God is about uplifting those who are low—then watch out!

Hannah sings:

“Those 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.  
The LORD kills and brings to life;  
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.  
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low, he also exalts.  
He 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 honour” (vv. 5-8).

Hannah had experienced in her own life a blessed upheaval, a wondrous reversal. She'd been ridiculed because she couldn't have children, yet then she had a baby: she'd gone from desolate and despairing to joyful and jubilant. And now, in her song, Hannah imagines prophetically what this means for the world; she imagines what it would look like for the entire world to experience a wondrous reversal like hers. And her vision, her song, is radical and revolutionary. In Hannah's vision, some are being lifted up, but others are being brought low; “the full now receive [...] the hunger they had [previously] imposed on others” (Brueggemann). It's maybe not what we'd want her to sing—but Hannah is not asking permission!

And when I say that her song is revolutionary, I mean that in the fullest sense of the word: a 'revolution' is a 'turning'—a turning that upends things and flips it all on its head. And in her revolutionary song, Hannah announces that the God who blessed her with a wondrous reversal will turn that wheel for the whole world, bringing the dying to life and the hungry to plenty: “And don't speak too soon, for the *wheel's* still in spin/And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'/For the loser now will be later to win” (Dylan).

For those who are full and rich, this song is unsettling—and it should be. And before we try to dismiss Hannah’s song, just remember who would one day paraphrase this song: Mary, the mother of Jesus, who—after her own surprising pregnancy—sang about the God who “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly,” who “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-1:53). More on that later; I’m planning to preach on Mary’s song in Advent. But for now, it’s enough to realize that Hannah’s Song runs right through the heart of the Gospel.

And really, this should be unsettling; yet remember: all the reversals that Hannah sings about—these are all about the power of God to enact life into a world of death. The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it like this: “Hannah [...] sing[s] of the [God] who ‘brings to life,’ who breaks the power of death. It does not matter if that power [of death] is experienced as barrenness, as despair, or as oppression. Hannah flings this song buoyantly in the face of the power of death. Her act is an act of daring hope, rooted in a concrete gift, waiting for more life yet to be given. Our [...] responsibility now is to see who among us can join this dangerous, daring song to this same God who has power to transform and willingness to intervene.”

Hannah’s revolutionary song is definitely unsettling... But don’t you think that this broken world of ours could use a little unsettling? Her song tells of reversals and upheavals. Don’t you think that this broken world could use some reversals and upheavals? I mean, how many times, in the last number of years, have you looked at the news, and thought to yourself, “the world is going nuts.” But Hannah sings about flipping things upside down—and in a world where, today, so much seems upside down, isn’t it wonderful to expect that God can yet turn this world right side up? We live in a world where injustice so often seems to have the upper hand; where hatred and prejudice and greed and exploitation all seem to come out on top. Well then, wouldn’t it be wonderful for God to flip all that upside down?

This is why Hannah’s Song offers such a powerful glimpse of hope in God. Hannah sings—Hannah simply *must* sing—because she realized that if God could bring such a wondrous reversal into her life, then just imagine what wondrous reversals God could yet bring into the life of this world! Hannah, in discovering the kindness and compassion of God in her life, realized that nothing and no one on earth is outside the reach of God’s radical love. Hannah realized that if God could redeem her from her despair, there’s no situation beyond God’s redeeming reach.

And when we hear Hannah’s song, this gives us hope, too. When we see situations of despair; when we see circumstances of loss; when we see the damage done by hatred and exploitation; then we can remember Hannah’s prophetic realization, that the God who revealed his revolutionary kindness and compassion to her can reveal his revolutionary kindness and compassion anywhere. Thank God! Amen.