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1 Samuel 2:1–10, NLT.

Then Hannah prayed:

*“My heart rejoices in the LORD!
The LORD has made me strong.
Now I have an answer for my enemies;
I rejoice because you rescued me.
² No one is holy like the LORD!
There is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

³ “Stop acting so proud and haughty!
Don’t speak with such arrogance!
For the LORD is a God who knows what you have done;
he will judge your actions.
⁴ The bow of the mighty is now broken,
and those who stumbled are now strong.
⁵ Those who were well fed are now starving,
and those who were starving are now full.
The childless woman now has seven children,
and the woman with many children wastes away.
⁶ The LORD gives both death and life;
he brings some down to the grave but raises others up.
⁷ The LORD makes some poor and others rich;
he brings some down and lifts others up.
⁸ He lifts the poor from the dust
and the needy from the garbage dump.
He sets them among princes,
placing them in seats of honor.
For all the earth is the LORD’s,
and he has set the world in order.

⁹ “He will protect his faithful ones,*

*but the wicked will disappear in darkness.
No one will succeed by strength alone.
¹⁰ Those who fight against the LORD will be shattered.
He thunders against them from heaven;
the LORD judges throughout the earth.
He gives power to his king;
he increases the strength of his anointed one.”*

All the earth is the Lord's.

The story of Hannah is often viewed as dated by Americans. It seems to tell an old school tale from a male dominated world – and no more. A woman apparently cannot have children and so she is worthless in the eyes of her society. All of that is true, but the story is actually much more powerful than this. Let's step through it. The story involves the mother of Samuel. Remember that before Israel appointed its first King, Saul, they were ruled by judges, wise men who were charismatic leaders. Samuel was the last of the judges of Israel. He was also the first of the so-called “later” prophets. The early prophets include Abraham and Moses. The later prophets include Isaiah and Ezekiel. Samuel had a huge impact on the history of Israel. He was fundamental in establishing their monarchy, and he personally anointed the first two kings, Saul and David. It was Samuel who rallied the People of God to fight the Philistines. Here is the story of Samuel's birth. His mother was Hannah. The problem is that she appeared to be barren. She could

not have a baby. It's important to remember that in ancient times, the Israelites had not solidified a shared notion of an afterlife. The Mosaic covenant promised them worldly things, land and progeny. It was their offspring who served as a kind of eternal life for them. Further, they worked the land, and so families needed children. It was also a male-dominated society, so they particularly valued male children. They of course didn't know that it was the man's sperm that decided the gender of a child, and they didn't have a scientific understanding of male infertility, so they blamed the wife when a couple couldn't have kids or couldn't have a son. Because Hannah and her husband were married for some time and they didn't have any children, Hannah found herself with no value in her society. Her husband was named Elkanah. He was an important man of greatly respected lineage. But a woman who cannot have children is treated with suspicion: surely, she must have committed some grave sin for God to deny her children. Hannah, however, is a pious woman, close to God, and firm in her faith and trust in God. Her husband does not blame her for her lack of children, and we are told this: ⁸ *"Why are you crying, Hannah?" Elkanah would ask. "Why aren't you eating? Why be downhearted just because you have no children? You have me—isn't that better than having ten sons?"* Hannah continues to pray to God, asking for children. She prays this: *"O LORD of Heaven's Armies, if you will look upon my sorrow and answer*

my prayer and give me a son, then I will give him back to you. He will be yours for his entire lifetime, and as a sign that he has been dedicated to the LORD, his hair will never be cut." This promise that she will never cut his hair means that she will hand her son over to God; it is the sign of a Nazarite, one who is consecrated totally to the service of God. When she does have a son, she names him Samuel, which means "heard by God" – and she keeps her promise.

Our passage today is Hannah's prayer of thanks to God after she has her son.

Here is part of it:

"My heart rejoices in the LORD!

The LORD has made me strong.

² *No one is holy like the LORD!*

*There is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.*

⁴ *The bow of the mighty is now broken,
and those who stumbled are now strong.*

⁵ *Those who were well fed are now starving,
and those who were starving are now full.*

*The childless woman now has seven children,
and the woman with many children wastes away.*

⁶ *The LORD gives both death and life;
he brings some down to the grave but raises others up.*

⁷ *The LORD makes some poor and others rich;
he brings some down and lifts others up.*

⁸ *He lifts the poor from the dust
and the needy from the garbage dump.*

*He sets them among princes,
placing them in seats of honor.*

*For all the earth is the LORD's,
and he has set the world in order.*

Notice what she equates to the significance of her finally having a child: those who stumble being made strong, the starving being made full, the dead being raised to life, a poor person becoming rich, the needy climbing out of the garbage dump (where presumably, they have been searching for food), becoming a prince, the entire world being set in order. She keeps her promise to God. This is what we are told, beginning with something Hannah says to her husband:

“Wait until the boy is weaned. Then I will take him to the Tabernacle and leave him there with the LORD permanently.”

²³ *“Whatever you think is best,” Elkanah agreed.*

²⁴ *When the child was weaned, Hannah took him to the Tabernacle in Shiloh. They brought along a three-year-old bull for the sacrifice and a basket of flour and some wine. Hannah said: “Now I am giving him to the LORD, and he will belong to the LORD his whole life.” And they worshiped the LORD there.*

Samuel goes on to become a spokesperson for God, a great teacher to the People of God, a ruler of the Israelite people, and a man mostly remembered for his call for his people to repent and return to living godly lives. Samuel eventually dies, apparently, during the years that Saul spent pursuing David. When he passed, all of Israel mourned him.

What do we gather from the story of Hannah? The obvious is that God is always with us. Hannah never wavered in her faith. She prayed. She also understood that God isn't Santa Clause. We don't just ask God for special stuff when we want it and then say thanks when we get it. Hannah knew that her

relationship with God was two-way. She knew, as she said in her prayer, that all the Earth is indeed the Lord's. We are not in charge. She was like us. She was bound by more than the Old Covenant, the contract between God and an entire people. Hannah had her own personal contract with God. That meant that her son wasn't just hers. She asked God for a child, not just for her, but for him.

There is more, though. Hannah was a positive person. She knew that if she stayed connected to God, she would be in a good place. Hannah spent her life in prayer. Here's something else. Remember that last line of her prayer of thanks?

*He gives power to his king;
he increases the strength of his anointed one."*

Messiah means "the anointed one", and many have read into this a prediction of Jesus Christ's coming. As it turns out, this translation is sloppy. What the Hebrew really says is: "He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed one," making the statement even more prophetic, as a horn is a symbol of heavenly victory, of dignity, and great authority.

Just last Sunday I spoke about a homeless man whom I have known for several years. As I always do, I changed some details about his identity and life to protect his privacy. I found out just a couple of days ago that he has died. He was a very young man. As a chaplain, I meet a lot of people who are suffering, who

are anxious, who are afraid, who are in doubt. I'm quite sure that he suffered in his life. I witnessed him very anxious at times. I'm sure he was sometimes afraid, and that he was doubtful about his future and the world. But there is one thing that this young man was not. He was not distant from God. When I walked into his hospital room, I would often see him watching Christian television. He knew the Bible well. He prayed. He didn't have a beautiful, earthly answer to his prayers like Hannah did. Like a lot of people who live on the street in America or live in polluted, poverty-stricken cities throughout the world, he died young. I would never speak for God. I would never claim to know what God has chosen to do with anyone who has passed away. But I would be very surprised if this young homeless man were not now in the presence of God, warm, safe, and joyous. He will never again be homeless.

After Samuel has died, Saul loses his faith in God. He goes from being the King of the People of God to being an envious, hateful, murderous man who wants to kill the young David, whom he sees as a rival. The Philistines are gathering for war and are about to brutally attack Israel. Saul and his sons will be killed. In desperation, knowing the end is near, Saul has his men find a woman who is a medium, someone who can call up the dead. He orders her to call up the spirit of

Samuel so that Saul can get Samuel's advice one last time. This is what transpires between Saul and Samuel (I have abbreviated it.)

¹¹ The woman said, "Well, whose spirit do you want me to call up?"

"Call up Samuel," Saul replied.

¹² When the woman saw Samuel, she screamed, "You've deceived me! You are Saul!"

¹³ "Don't be afraid!" the king told her. "What do you see?"

"I see a god coming up out of the earth," she said.

¹⁴ "What does he look like?" Saul asked.

"He is an old man wrapped in a robe," she replied. Saul realized it was Samuel, and he fell to the ground before him.

¹⁵ "Why have you disturbed me by calling me back?" Samuel asked Saul.

"Because I am in deep trouble," Saul replied. "The Philistines are at war with me, and God has left me and won't reply by prophets or dreams. So I have called for you to tell me what to do."

¹⁶ But Samuel replied, "Why ask me, since the LORD has left you and has become your enemy? ¹⁷ The LORD has done just as he said he would. He has torn the kingdom from you and given it to your rival, David. The LORD will hand you and the army of Israel over to the Philistines tomorrow, and you and your sons will be here with me. The LORD will bring down the entire army of Israel in defeat."

²⁰ Saul fell full length on the ground, paralyzed with fright because of Samuel's words.

Sometimes the greatest people on Earth become the lowest. Their power, their success, their wealth, the adoration they receive, corrupts and destroys them. Whether they die young or old, they die not just physically, but spiritually. That young homeless man, I believe I called him Jesse last week, he died physically, but I do not believe he died spiritually. I think that he is with God, that if he was conscious that he was passing away from this life, he was not paralyzed with fright

by words delivered from God. He had lived like Hannah, connected to God, no matter what. It takes incredible strength, unbelievable faith to not be broken when things go badly, when we are disappointed or desperate.

I do hope that this Christmas season, this Advent, you can turn to God. Don't be afraid to tell God what you need, what has gone wrong in your life, what you are desperately hoping will happen. Maybe it's a sick loved one that you pray will heal. Maybe there is something you've struggled to make happen for a long time, but you have not succeeded. Remember what Hannah knew - that a contract with God is two-way. When you ask God to protect you, to walk with you every day, to guide you, to lead you where you have been trying to get to, you need to offer your heart and your very self to God. Trust God. You might get exactly what you pray for, like Hannah did. You might end up with very little in this world, like that young homeless man. But do trust God. And do remember that all the Earth is indeed the Lord's, and if you live by that, all will be perfectly fine. Please pray with me.

God, this is a tough world we live in. Things go wrong. We fail. We get sick. We lose loved ones. We find ourselves looking back and wondering where we went wrong. But we do know that if we always look toward you, and if we value your presence and your blessing more than the things we seek in this life, then we will be joyous forever. Amen.