

Hannah's Song of Hope
1 Samuel 2:1-10

November 14, 2021 - Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

2 *Hannah prayed and said,*

*“My heart exults in the Lord;
 my strength is exalted in my God.[a]
 My mouth derides my enemies,
 because I rejoice in my[b] victory.*

2 *“There is no Holy One like the Lord,
 no one besides you;
 there is no Rock like our God.*

3 *Talk 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.*

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

5 *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.*

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

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

8 *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 honor.[c]*

*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.*

10 *The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered;
 the Most High[d] 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.

God often speaks through people we least expect.

My first internship in seminary was working as a summer chaplain at a correctional facility for young men in Bordentown, New Jersey. Going into that summer, I thought my job was to bring God to this place and these men, as if God wasn't already there. I quickly realized my first couple of weeks that it was going to be absolutely the opposite. These men, at Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility, were going to speak to me all summer long words of hope, faith, love, and challenge.

In our Bible studies they encouraged, lifting up the gifts and strength they saw in one another. They challenged each other, and me, to dive deeper into our faith. They pushed each other to truly dream about their lives after incarceration, and trust that God had more for each of us. They shared honest testimonies and stories, and in them found strength, community, and new visions of hope. And at the end of each meeting, they prayed not just for those gathered there, but for all who were incarcerated. For families outside. For the guards and staff. Even for people who had hurt them.

That summer, a local professor was offering a creative writing class in the correctional facility. One week I decided to go and attend the class. I found out that they all had an assignment the week before to write down part of their story as a poem. One of the men I got to know well that summer, named Brian, was in the class. As the professor asked if anyone would read their assignment out loud, most of the men put their heads down or turned sideways, hoping someone else would be called first. But not Brian. Brian stood up, and with a big smile on his face, shared his words.

It was a beautiful poem. In it was pain. In it was struggle. He wrote about where he grew up. He wrote about love that he turned away, voices he shouldn't have listened to, and decisions he wished he could take back. He knew this place was not where he was meant to be. But then the poem turned. And he began speaking about hope. Hope that God wasn't done with him yet. Hope for a grace to be made real. Hope for a more just world. Hope that people would see what God sees, that he and every man in there are more than their label, more than their crime, more than their worst moments. Hope that his life and poetry and story would touch other's lives. By the end of it, he sat back down, and I sat there just dumbstruck at the hope and faith Brian had just given me. That even in this dark place, light and gifts, and hope still shines bright.

I was surprised to hear such a powerful message in that place. But maybe I shouldn't have been. Because in the years that have followed, I've realized more and more that God often speaks hope most clearly and loudly, not in places that are neat and clean and safe, not through people who have had everything work out just fine and smooth. But often God's message of hope comes through those who have known struggle. Who have known pain. Who have known injustice. Who have known what it is to walk in the valley of darkness and somehow still meet the good shepherd there.

Anyone who has ever been a part of a grief or recovery group can tell you that. They will tell you it is not people standing on the outside, safe and detached, who offer the most

hope and help. It is people who have gone through the struggle, the messiness and the pain. Who know exactly what it is like to face the darkest of days and the most painful of moments. And they know not just words that sound nice and polite. But they know the true power of honesty, of stories, of visions and dreams, of knowing real pain and struggle, and finding solidarity with others in it.

These are God's vessels of hope. These are God's witnesses to light.

And this is Hannah. Mother of the Prophet Samuel. Second wife of Elkanah. Poet, songwriter, whose song has given hope and faith and dreams to people for 3,000 years. Hannah is not a very likely voice for God. She is not a priest or Levite or judge. There is no hint to formal education or training. She has no high status or power or wealth of any kind.

But Hannah knows what is to struggle. She knows what is to be a wife who can't bear children, in a patriarchal culture where that is valued above all else. She knows what it is to have whispers about her, to be judged by others, to be set on the margins of culture and religion. And she knows there the power of crying out fully, of being completely honest, of coming before God with all her heart, soul and mind.

And when she knows God hears her and loves her and walks with her, she finds an incredible voice. She finds a powerful song. As she sings out loud:

*7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
8 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 honor.*

She can offer these words because she knows what it is to be on that ash heap. She knows what it is to be on the margins, forgotten or derided. And she knows God is there. Her words of hope ring true, because she has lived it and dreamt it, and is able to join fully with those who find themselves there, and need a word of hope for today.

For us as the church, we often think it's our role to go out and be the ones who offer words of hope and faith. There are definitely times we are called to do that. But today, we are reminded of another calling. The calling to listen. The calling to trust that God is speaking through so many diverse voices and experiences and struggles in the world. The calling to listen to the Hannahs and the Brians and all those who will surprise us with songs and words and dreams. And we are especially called to give space and room for those voices to be heard.

Here at Bon Air Presbyterian, there are so many ways you all are already connected with the wider community. Through RISC. Through the Bon Air Juvenile Detention Center. Through Voices of Jubilee. Through the interfaith Trialogue. Through hosting AA. Through the work of Angel Tree and food banks and so much more that I still need to discover. It is great that this is a church that gives. That serves. That connects.

But in hearing the words of Hannah this day, may we also be a church that listens. That listens to the songs and dreams and hopes and words of others. That we may be a church that trusts that God isn't just speaking through us. God is speaking through all those who have gone through the reality of life. And in them, we can find a new word of hope, a new song, a new vision for a world flipped upside down, made whole through the love, grace, and radical welcome of Jesus Christ. Amen.