



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
November 17, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "All Things New"

1 Samuel 1:4-20

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters, but to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat.

Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, 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, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the

LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."

And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went her way and ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her.

In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hannah 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 your victory. There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

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. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. 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 honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. He 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."

“All Things New”

Do you ever find yourself, in a bad mood, during worship?

And, it may not even be the fault of the worship service itself. It's just the mood you're in.

And you find yourself, arguing with the liturgy.

Arguing with the sermon.

Arguing with the prayers.

Of course, your answer to all these questions is *no*. After all, you worship at Westminster Presbyterian Church! But, for the sake of argument, just stretch your imagination with me for a moment.

Last Tuesday, I was in such a mood, as I sat through a worship service – not anywhere near Westminster; it was a Presbytery function far away.

And, it wasn't the fault of the service itself, certainly not the fault of the worship leaders. It was just the place I was in, after a couple of difficult weeks. I found myself arguing back with the liturgy.

For example, during the Prayers of the People, the liturgist gave an impassioned prayer for unity in the church. He prayed for, 'Unity in each church, unity in the city, unity in the state, unity in the nation.'

And I started thinking, is unity – for unity's sake – really the goal here? Yes, unity can be powerful, and good, and life-giving. But I thought, unity can also be toxic, if its unity around the wrong thing. Or, if its unity that tries to cover over our differences and the real troubles that people face.

You already know this: there's a lot of people scared right now. People afraid about their access to healthcare and housing. LGBT communities and communities of color are concerned that the hard-won rights and recognition they have worked for, for decades, will be eroded.¹

What is unity, I thought, if we don't face that fear?
Is unity really our biggest priority right now?

After the prayer, much later on, there was another person who presented a statement of faith. And it was one of the most beautiful, most scholarly statements

¹ See, for example, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/19/interview-trump-poses-more-threats-rights-lgbt-people>

of faith I have ever read.

And it was old school. It had quotes from classic theologians throughout. One of the quotes used about the church really stood out:

George Buttrick once said: “We as Christians are many bodies in one bloodstream.” Meaning the bloodstream of Christ.

That is beautiful. But I also wondered, is that true, in this time of great division? In this time of fear and threat? This time, which is, of course, our time?

Truth be told I left the worship service in a worse mood than when I entered it. And as I left I wondered: what is to become of us, and this thing we call, the church?

The good news is things picked up when I started studying our text for today. You know, our Bible, is also full of times and people in distress; times when no one could see a way forward. And over and over in the Bible, God has to remind people, God has to remind us, that God is a God of hope, a God of the way forward, a God does not abide by our logic of hopelessness.

Take these chapters of 1 Samuel, for example.

In the opening chapters of the book, which will lead up to the history of the great King David, Israel is destitute. The mighty nation of the Philistines threatens them at every turn, and the people are in disarray. Over and over, one judge after another, had attempted to lead, and instead was defeated, if not by foreign adversaries than by their own incompetence and unfaithfulness.

The religious life of the nation was in no better shape. The priest Eli and his sons embezzled, taking the temple sacrifices for themselves, provoking the wrath of the God.

And in the midst of all of this, there’s Hannah, who is also a marginalized figure. In fact, she is the oppressed among the oppressed. In the patriarchy of the ancient near east, there were deep expectations that a wife to produce a son, an heir. And even more than that, Hannah longs for a child.

And even though Hannah is a marginal figure in this context, the text, unexpectedly, pays attention to Hannah, centers on her even. Not only that, it says that the future of Israel, in fact, the future of this world, doesn’t start in the halls of

power, doesn't start with the rulers and decision makers, doesn't even start in the church. It starts with her, childless Hannah, the least of these.

The Lord remembered her, says the text

In a place of hopelessness, in an unexpected place, God does a new thing. Hannah gives birth to Samuel, who will grow up to be the great prophet, who will usher in the reign of David.

In other words, God does not operate, by the logic of our hopelessness. God is not constrained, by the boundaries of what we think can happen. God is free from our expectations.

This is why Hannah sings:

[The Lord] raises up the poor from the dust; [God] lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, and inherit a seat of honor...but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail.

Hannah's words will be echoed centuries later, in another marginalized corner, another obscure backwater far from the seats of power in the empire, when an unmarried and pregnant teenager named Mary sings, after being visited by an angel who proclaimed her favored by the Lord. In the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke, this Mary, the mother of Jesus, echoes Hannah, proclaiming:

[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

You see, the message of Scripture is that God does not abide by the constraints of the current social reality. For this God is the God of hope, the God of the way forward, even when we cannot see the way forward for ourselves.

What's more: these Scriptures proclaim that God does not abide by our expectations about who is worthy to lead this way forward. In fact, over and over again in Scripture, it is not the haughty, the impressive, the powerful, but instead God looks upon and lifts up the lowly, the most marginal, the most threatened among us. It is through and with them, that God makes a way out of no way.

That is Hannah's song. That is Mary's song.

After the worship service on Tuesday, on the way home, I found myself thinking about the funeral for a man named Richard Sales, who was a member of my former congregation in Asheville, North Carolina.

Richard Sales was 52 years old when he died unexpectedly in a vehicle accident off I-40 in 2018.² He had worked as a chief in the local fire department for 31 years. He was also a longtime member of our congregation. He even sang in the choir.

Richard was an openly gay man, and one of the reasons he had chosen our church was because, like Westminster, my former church was open and affirming and had several members from LGBT communities in the congregation.

At the same time, Richard was well respected in the local fire department. In fact, he came from a family of fire fighters. And in Western North Carolina, the local fire department was not open and affirming. Richard had to negotiate those opposing parts of his identity, and for the most part, his family and his work colleagues, though they knew his identity, choose not to talk much about it.

His funeral was the biggest funeral I have ever been a part of. I served as the liturgist. My former boss and Head of Staff, the Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop was the preacher.

The congregation was too big for our church building, and so we moved the service to a local evangelical mega-church, Biltmore Baptist, whose auditorium could hold the hundreds who attended Richard's service.

And so, Richard's service, much like his life, brought many different kinds of people together.

There were Richard's congregants and pastors from his open and affirming church, as well as members of Asheville's Gay Men's Chorus, where he was also a member. There were also the rough and gruff men of the fire department, including Richard's own father, who, I kid you not, goes by the nickname "Bud."

And there we were, in a conservative, evangelical mega-church, being led by a liberal female pastor, whose leadership and ordination, by the way, would not be

² <https://www.andersrice.com/obituaries/Richard-Lee-Sales?obId=4343668>

recognized by the church where that service was held. I don't know how we got away with that one.

I did not envy my former boss, Marcia Mount Shoop, either. She not only had to honor and give thanks to God for Richard's life, a man we all so dearly loved, who died way too soon in his young life. She also had to speak meaningfully to such a diverse congregation, who ranged from the most liberal you can imagine to the most conservative you can imagine, all in one place.

And let me tell you, she knocked it out of the park. I still remember one line from her sermon all these years later. She said something to this effect:

Richard Sales had a heart big enough, to do something no one else thought could happen, which is to bring us all together, in our differences, into that room together.

I thought about that line last Tuesday, on my way home from a worship service, where I argued with the liturgist, about a prayer calling for unity.

I thought, that moment, years ago, was the closest thing I've ever experienced, when it came to unity across difference in the church.

But notice, notice this: it wasn't just unity, for unity's sake.

It was a unity created for the purpose of honoring and uplifting, someone who was dearly loved but was also someone vulnerable, a gay man in Western North Carolina.

I thought, isn't a shame, that it took his death, for us to join together as a community, and say together how much we loved him.

Friends, this is how we are going to move forward:

By following this God whom we worship, who does not abide by the boundaries that we have set for ourselves. This God who will not follow the 'everyone always divided,' 'everyone just for themselves' logic of today.

And at the same time, we will follow this same God who lifts up the most lowly, the most marginalized, the most threatened among us. This God who lifted up Hannah, and Mary. This God who calls us always to do the same.

This is where God is calling us today. And in the coming years.

Westminster is a place where many different people, with different backgrounds and histories, with different identities and resources and vulnerabilities and wounds come together. We don't agree on all things theological and political. I know it sometimes seems like we do. I sometimes think that too, but then I have conversations with you all, and I realize, 'oh boy, my assumptions are wrong,' as soon as you start to open your mouths.

But this, is what unites us:

- Westminster is a church committed to upholding the dignity of all people.
- We believe that *all* - all races, genders, sexualities, abilities – *all* are created in the image of God,
- And we know that God calls us, not only to love one another but also to rally around, circle, and support each other, especially the most vulnerable among us, in and outside of these walls.

And that is what we will do, because that is what God does.

It is a practice and a belief that charts a new way in this current social reality. In the midst of all the conflict and the hate that seem to rule this day, it is, in fact, a new thing. The way that the God who is always calling forward.

It is Hannah's song:

A song is just a true today as it was thousands of years ago when it was first uttered.

"God raises up the poor from the dust...God will guard the feet of his faithful ones."

Hannah's song.

Mary's song.

It is our song, too.

May it always be our song, too. Amen.

