

Proper 28, Pentecost 26, Year B
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In today's Old Testament reading we hear about Hannah, a woman who was deeply grieved. She lived in a culture that valued women based on their ability to bear sons and she was not able to have children. Hannah was like Sarah and Rachel, significant women mentioned in the Bible who were loved by their husbands, but struggled with the personal sorrow and social stigma of not having children. And, as with Sarah and Rachel and the other women in their families, there was tension between Hannah and Peninnah, who also had children with Elkanah, but who did not receive the love that Hannah did. It is no coincidence to find these commonalities among the great matriarchs of the Old Testament, for these are hints that Hannah's life will be touched by God, and that the longed for son she will bear will change the lives of God's people. While Sarah and Rachel deeply desired sons and did what they could to make them a possibility, Hannah is the first of the great biblical women to go directly to God with her request. Hannah made a vow, presented herself to God at the temple, and poured out her soul in prayer. Her silent prayer was observed by the priest Eli, who mistook her for being drunk, but then was moved to say, **"Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."** Hannah left confident in those words, eating and drinking, and being sad no more. Eventually she bore a son named

Samuel, which means **‘God has heard.’** Samuel was dedicated to God and was raised in the temple by the priest Eli. He was the first of seven sons that Hannah had.

What you may not know about Samuel is that, as the last of the leaders called Judges, he would be the one to help Israel make the transformation to a monarchy under King David. King David is the one to whom God promised: **“I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”** It is no wonder that Hannah’s prayer, which we read this morning, is all about the power of God and the reversal of fortunes, as God used one of the least likely people to create life giving change for God’s people. It is also worth noting that Hannah’s prayer is echoed in the New Testament by Mary, another faithful Jewish woman whose miraculous pregnancy would bless all of God’s people. Mary’s song of praise, the *Magnificat*, gives voice to God upending our understanding of how the world works. Mary said,

**My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant...
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly.**

This theme of God working through faithful women who bear sons who will change the world continues in today's Gospel reading, for Jesus is the ultimate Son who will change the world. He has been hinting just how radical that change will be to his disciples, who have trouble imagining what Jesus envisions. As Jesus and his disciples exited the Temple, one of his disciples commented on the impressiveness of the Temple and its surroundings saying, **"Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"** The Temple was the center of Jewish life, worship, and sacrifice. It was, for Jews, the literal home of God. The original Temple built under King Solomon had been destroyed and it had been many years before the second Temple was constructed, recreating Jewish life in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. Jesus responded to his disciples by saying, **"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."** This introduction led to a conversation we contemporary Americans might have trouble following, for the disciples then wanted to know the time frame and details for when **"all these things are about to be accomplished."** In Jewish culture after the exile there was a significant form of writing about The End Times called apocalyptic literature. *Apocalypse* means *revelation*, as in the Book of Revelation, and it refers to God's revealing to the prophets what would happen at the end of time. Apocalyptic literature, like any genre, has specific elements that help the reader to know what type of writing it is and how to read it.

The closest we come to apocalyptic literature in our culture is science fiction, for both kinds of writing show humans having to deal with life forces from beyond Earth and their impact on our lives and planet. Both science fiction and apocalyptic literature give us a portrayal of what is literally alien to us and how it might affect us, often in dramatic ways. The disciples' ears perked up when Jesus made a reference to the destruction of the Temple because they heard a familiar apocalyptic theme and they wanted to know what Jesus knew. Fortunately for us, *The End Time* has not arrived yet. In fact, Jesus was not even referring to *The End Time*. He was predicting the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem at the hand of the Romans in the year 70 CE. That is why, if you listen carefully you hear Jesus say, “**Not one stone will be left *here* upon another....**” No, he was not predicting the end of the whole world. He was preparing them for the end of their corner of the world, as they knew it.

What might you and I have in common with Hannah or Mary or the disciples? What we have in common with them is that God is willing to work through some pretty unlikely people to do God's work in changing the world. We may have children; we may not. We might have meaningful jobs; we might not. We may think we know the Scriptures well; we may not. What the Bible shows us is that God works through the lives of ordinary people, often people whose lives are not what they had hoped in some important way, to bring change for them and

for the world around them. Perhaps you have that sense of longing, of knowing your heart's desire, only to have it go unfulfilled for years and years. Perhaps you are content. Life is good enough and you aren't motivated to seek more. Or maybe you feel drawn beyond where you are, but are not sure where that might lead. No matter who you are, God can begin the next wave of transformation in the world through you. Be bold and pray as Hannah prayed. Be open and say yes as Mary said yes. Be willing to follow and learn, even if you are occasionally slow on the uptake as the disciples were. It means letting go of control, of life the way we expect it to be, of necessarily getting what we want simply for our own sake. But it opens us up the possibility of a life that gives life to the world beyond us, to a world that God has envisioned, even if we haven't. To take this risk may mean that we become a gift rather than just receiving one, and that our world might just get upended in the best possible way.

Amen