

“What Song Are We Singing?”
1 Samuel 2:1-10
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
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Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

This past week I was grateful to be able to participate in the summer conference of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America~Bautistas por la Paz, affectionately called “Peace Camp.” The theme was “Moving Mountains,” as you may remember from when we recognized “BPFNA Sunday” in May—and throughout the week, as people shared about their lives and as news of Supreme Court decisions flowed in and as our Puerto Rican siblings shared about their lives in a USA colony, it became more and more clear exactly how far the mountains must move for there to be peace through justice.

And yet...my work in this Peace Camp was to accompany the children and youth while their adults were in the plenary sessions and workshops. And I gotta tell you something you probably already know from witnessing the children and youth in our own congregation: kids are incredible. They are not only the future, they are the present, they are the gift, they are the right now.

One of the tasks asked of the children was to put together a song about peace to share during the closing worship on Thursday evening. Between playing soccer and nature walks and art projects, the small group of children put together a beautiful and somewhat profound song in the voice of Sesame Street’s Elmo and Marvel’s new Spiderman Miles Morales—and in this song, they came up with these words:

“We sing this song together, we sing about peace, a peace that lasts forever...we sing together, because together’s always better.”

Even in those simple words, the kids were reaching for building a peace that lasts over generations, that draws people together, that recognizes the importance of joining our voices in a chorus of community. And if you were at the Centro Capuchino in Trujillo Alto in San Juan, you probably could hear us singing. But did you also know that we wrote that song by listening to each other, by taking a risk by creating our own melody? And did you know that as we sang, our breathing aligned and our heartbeats regulated, and we felt emotionally closer to each other?

And I think that’s a bit of what the song in this Scripture has to teach us today.

Hear these words from 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (NRSVUE):

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.

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.

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 will perish in darkness,
for not by might does one prevail.

10 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."

In these words, which come right after the story of how Hannah dedicated her miracle child Samuel to the service of God, Hannah sings about her faith and God's presence in her life. She sings about who God is to her, saying God is a God of knowledge, of life, a judge, a protective leader. And she sings about how God will be present with her and her people. She says,

"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.”

Though Hannah sings alone, her voice joins with the chorus of prophetic people throughout the Bible who call on God’s justice to reign in the human realm. In Hannah’s worldview, God is an agent of great reversals—those who were weak are strong, and those who were oppressive are now marginalized; those who were hungry are filled, and those who rested with satisfied stomachs are begging for bread. The poor inherit seats of honor, despite their humble beginnings.

And we follow this pattern of Hannah’s song in our own lives.

We sing about our life experiences. We tell our stories, and we listen to each other’s stories as sacred gifts, hearing the complexity of emotion flowing through our family and friends and church community.

Right now, as the Supreme Court continues on its path of dismantling the work of the Civil Rights movement and legal protections for marginalized groups, many people are taking to social media to talk about what they’ve been through as individuals. They are talking about what educational possibilities were opened to them because of affirmative action for Black, Indigenous, and people of color, and women. They are sharing about the importance of having diverse colleagues to learn with and from, making strong and creative collectives and teams. They are describing the importance of having all marriages recognized as valid, not only by businesses, but by communities and the federal government...and the threats that so many face when this legal protection is not recognized. They are expressing the heartbreak of having student loans reinstated after the pandemic forgiveness ended, effectively ending dreams of owning a home or having children for many people my age and younger. How do these decisions affect you, and your loved ones? I hope you will share with each other about the impacts of these decisions.

And yet, like Hannah, many still sing, we still sing, about who God is to us.

I think of that Taizé hymn that I learned as pastors dear to me were going through a heartbreaking loss of a child: “within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away, never dies away.” Here, God is the fire-kindler, despite the pressing shadow of grief. I think about a contemporary worship song we sang at the ABC Biennial, led by a worship team from Caguas, Puerto Rico: “you make beautiful things, you make beautiful things out of dust; you make beautiful things, you make beautiful things out of us!” Here, God is the creative artist, the giver of life and the one who calls forth each of our beauty to mirror Their own divine beauty, in a blessing for all Creation.

We also sing about how God will be present with us and our people, in this place and in this time. Last week, you sang Canticle of the Turning, which declares that “every rod shall be crushed by God,” and the tyrant shall be flung from his throne. That is a song we can sing out with strong voices right now—because we are so acutely aware of the need for the rods of oppressors and the tyrants of empires and capitalist systems to be thrown down. The song says, “the world is about to turn,” and let it be so, for we need a great turning!

We, like Hannah, sing songs that represent our philosophies of life, our theologies of the Holy, from the particular impact on us as individuals to our hopes and dreams and expectations for God’s presence in our society and in our world. For example, we sing today that God is God of all the nations, not just this one, no matter how pious Christian nationalism seems to some as it pervades our lives from the motto on the money in our wallets to the walls of Texas classrooms.

Beloved Seattle First Baptist Church, what might our song be, if we take the song of Hannah as an example?

Maybe it would go something like this:

Praise the Holy who makes me strong and courageous;

I know I am never truly lost because your prophetic Word remains true.

You are ever-present, in all places and in all times and in all things,

We are never alone, with you the Great Comforter.

The thoughtless shallow piousness

And self-righteous babbling of those who would pretend to be God

Become silent in the face of Wisdom who will see that they reap what they sow.

The public platforms and unachieved advancement shall crumble

As the groundswell of the marginalized floods with living water.

Those who took their ivory towers for granted and who ate prime dinners on private jets while the world burns around them are cast out, walking desolate streets;

But those who were working paycheck to paycheck are now studying the humanities and creating art that lifts the voice of the people.

The Holy gives breath and takes away,

Shows the rich the hell on Earth which they have created through their ravaging,

And shows the poor the beauty of a life abundant with all they need to thrive.

From the so-called “undesirable” places of the Earth,

The leaders and artists and musicians and lovers of goodness come.

From the left-behind and pushed-aside and ignored, queer love flows plentifully and teaches the world about dedication and commitment and family.

The Holy is in all and through all,

The Holy is Love which makes the cosmos burn.

The ones who do justice shall go with grace and surety,

But the ones who try victory by strength, coercion and might shall be cast out.

The Holy will shatter those who try to make a buck off selling the American dream

And bring down to ashes those who ignore the humanity of all people

For their own gain.

All that is life-giving will flourish, while all that is death-dealing

Will decompose, to give rise to a new way of being separate from

Ideologies of terror.

The Holy One is in the midst of Their people, All Their people,

And will remain so for the duration of all that is Love.

In our Scripture passage today, we heard how Hannah sang about God's presence in her life and what God had done for her. We heard how she sang about God's character. We heard her sing her faith that God would be with her people, bringing real justice and real peace to those who were downtrodden.

There's another dimension of Hannah's song that is important, though.

Her song was the pattern for Mary's Magnificat. Hannah, alone in the temple, praying fervently and proclaiming boldly how God has come through for her—she inspired the song of a teenage Jewish girl, living in a small town in Judea, who would be blessed by the Holy One to bear God's special child. The song of one woman echoed across the generations so that another could hear it, could receive the message and so it could become part of her song.

So, beloved church, what song are we singing? How do we communicate Holy presence in our lives, and our hope and expectations for the future? Whose voices resonate in our memories, empowering our songs? Who do we have in mind to sing for now, who, generations from now, may look back and be moved by what we sing today?

With Hannah, we sing for those pushed to the margins of society. We sing for those who wait for signs. We sing for those who wonder if God really loves them. We sing for those who desire God's healing and restoration. We sing for those who feel alone. We sing for those who have felt empire's crushing grasp. We sing for those who wonder which way they ought to go. We sing for

the children, and youth. We sing for those who come after us. We sing for each other. We sing with each other.

May it ever be so. Amen.