

“There is No Rock Like Our God”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
Edina Morningside Community Church; October 16, 2016

1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10

After [Hannah and her husband Elkanah] 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.”

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.”

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 my 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 shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall 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.”

Some of you have heard me talk a little about growing up in a religious cult. I was born into it, and all my childhood memories are of those twelve years. There’s not enough time to go much into it here, but suffice it to say that my daydreams involved being kidnapped by the Amish, with their libertine lifestyle. My early years involved a lot of neglect and emotional abuse, orchestrated by the cult leader. I didn’t often understand what I was supposed to do, just that I got it wrong much of the time. I remember feeling overwhelmed as a child by all the rules I was expected to live up to. Add to that the drama that could be expected among five other squabbling siblings, plus the responsibilities of caring for animals and property on the family farm. Turns out, I was a pretty anxious kid!

Sometimes when I was really at my wit’s end and could not think to do anything else, I would hide by myself and curl up in a ball on the floor. I’d try to get as small as possible, with my face to the ground and my shoulders hunched over my folded legs. Those who know yoga would recognize it as something like “child’s pose”. But whereas that is a peaceful and relaxing way to finish a yoga routine, my childhood crouch was tense and fretful. I used to rock back and forth in my little ball, trying to shut out the world and my confusion with a little mantra. I’d murmur to myself, over and over again, “O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus”. It was my way of praying then, when I didn’t have any words for what was wrong but I had some sense that God knew. Rocking and praying like that, even with nobody else around, I would gradually come to stillness. Sometimes I slept; other times I just retreated into the sound and feel of breathing. I eventually got to a point where I could unfold myself slowly and stand up again,

recognizing that God could handle what I could not. From there I had the strength to go back into my world, to take whatever next step was before me.

I haven't thought about those moments for a long time. But now, what's going on in the world brings that prayer back to my lips, "O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus." Now cholera, after a thousand dead after a hurricane after an earthquake in Haiti. Now off-the-shelf consumer drones are being weaponized and deployed by ISIS. Now the once-upon-a-time allies of Russia and the U.S. wage a proxy war of words, cybercrime, and "chicken" with fighter jets, while the people of Aleppo are bombed daily by their own leaders. Now global climate change has progressed so far there's near-certain probability of mega-droughts in the American Southwest (to say nothing of elsewhere around the globe). Now voters of whatever political persuasion must confront deception, disgust, and even sexual assault on the lowest road to the highest office in the land. Now the national revelations of racial bias in policing have come home in [video of an ugly encounter](#) between a black man and the Edina Police Department last Wednesday less than three miles from here. Nothing seems to go the way that it should. Even *Prairie Home Companion* isn't the same anymore! "O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus."

Can we understand the heartache and lament of Hannah as she weeps bitterly before the Lord in Shiloh? She has an adoring husband in Elkanah, but that is cold comfort when her yearning desire for a child goes unmet year after year. October 15th, yesterday, is set aside each year for Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness. Those who mark the day, including among our families and friends, know most immediately how bereft Hannah feels at the start of today's passage. But anyone who has ever been beside oneself at the state of the world or at life itself understands the desperate bargaining with God that Hannah resorts to. She is us, whenever we're at our wit's end and driven to our knees in prayer. She gives us an example of fervent stick-to-it-ness, asking God for her deepest desire even when she knows it's beyond asking. If God will grant her a child, she will raise him to be a special boy, and return him to God's service in the temple.

Then Hannah gets to live the longing of countless infertile couples. She is among the small minority of people who receive exactly what they pray for! She bears a child and names him Samuel, which means "God hears". Life comes anew when it's least expected, when all her former experiences have been loss. Hannah's cry of lament at the Shiloh temple has turned into the squeal of a baby. Praise God that the storm passes over for Hannah, that new hope and new joy are believable even when they take so long to arrive. God *does* give life where there is barrenness, though often it takes a different form than that of a child. Sometimes it looks instead like leaning on the everlasting arms, until we are able to see a path open up and are led willingly along the way we once feared to travel. However it happens, those who grieve and lament will find divine consolation, as rocking anxiety and heartsickness are held in God's cradling embrace.

Faithful Hannah does at least one more thing worthy of notice. When she sees her own prayer fulfilled, she gives voice to God's steadfast power on behalf of all who suffer. Following through on her promise to God, after a few years of raising Samuel, Hannah brings her son back to Shiloh and gives him to be raised in the temple. Leaving the child at the temple could have been heartbreaking, yet she breaks into praise:

My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. ...There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. ...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... The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.

Hannah's song proclaims God's care for her, then magnifies that care to the poor and needy of all the earth. [As Rolf Jacobson says](#), "this poignant plea that God hear the birth of a child" suddenly "becomes a microcosm of the grace of God and the transformative power of God at work in the world."

Hannah's personal gratitude for God's care, leads her to lend her voice and heart to proclaim the rock-solid love of God, which sets every captive free. That is the movement of the Spirit, and the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. When we're overwhelmed and heartsick with the world, rocking out our frustrations and hopelessness, God soothes away our fears as a mother cradles a child, then plants us on the steadfast bedrock of faith and hope, proclaiming with Hannah: "There is no rock like our God".

There is no rock like our God, so what might alarm us will not overwhelm us but goad us into action. There is no rock like our God, so God's people will respond with compassion to global disease and disaster. There is no rock like our God, so even fearful threats will give way before a power greater than our own. There is no rock like our God, so this global home God has given us will be so treasured by people of faith and good will that our practices will change and the planet be healed of its destructive fever. There is no rock like our God, so politics must move from personalities to principles, committed to the belief that all are created in the image of God, and all can work together to reflect our deepest moral values. There is no rock like our God, because the tomb of barrenness and grief has been emptied by the power of divine resurrection, and God's world will never be the same. These are not policy statements, nor proud declarations of our own power, but statements made in the confidence that is ours in Jesus Christ. May it be so, and may God use us along the way.

Let us pray: *O God, rock us in the bosom of Hannah, of Abraham, of all your faithful people of old. Fill us with their faith, until your comfort and assurance becomes like rock under our feet, solid footing on which we can stand with you and push for the transformation of the world. Amen.*