

# *Hannah's Song*

*I Samuel 2: 1-10*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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If you want to get things done, you've got to have a plan for your time. You've got to forge ahead against distractions with a goal in mind. That's a good way to live when you want to be accomplished. When we read the stories of the Bible, though, we see how often God accomplishes things in our lives through interruptions and reversals. He surprises us with unexpected twists. We get swept up into God's plans just when it's not anything we would plan. We saw a few weeks ago how the barren woman Hannah at last conceived a son who would be the great prophet Samuel. We saw last week how that eight year old Samuel heard the voice of the LORD when the head priest could not. The God of the Scriptures is full of surprises. When we have eyes to see his hand, our lives become full of wonders.

Week before last, I was in Scotland to give some talks at a theology conference. This is my kind of foreign mission! Before the conference started, I had a day in Edinburgh, a city we've grown to love through the years. That afternoon, I was doing some promised errands. I bought some stoneware Rhonda likes from a store called Anta. Then I had coffee at the Starbuck's on Princes Street which overlooks the castle, just as I had promised Mary-Emeline I would do. After coffee, I crossed over the wide Princes St. from the side with the shops to the side with the gardens. My plan was to visit some of my favorite paintings in the National Gallery before I had to leave for the conference.

As I walked, I heard music begin from a busker back over by the shops. Busking is a great tradition in Edinburgh. A musician finds a spot on a busy street and begins to play. He leaves a hat out on the sidewalk so that passerby can throw in a few coins if they like what they hear. There are a lot of bagpiping buskers in Scotland. I love hearing Highland Cathedral or Amazing Grace as I walk through the spires of the Scottish capital. But this guy wasn't playing a bagpipe or even a violin. He had a guitar plugged into a speaker and a foot drum. When he started to sing, I thought "Am I hearing John Mayer? No, wait, it sounds like music from *Once*, the musical about an Irish busker in Dublin." I stopped. He was singing about love he once had, love he lost, love he wanted back. The singer's passion crossed the wide street and arrested me in my tracks. I sat down on a bench to listen. On one side of a busy street a young busker with his whole life ahead of him

was singing his heart out. On the other side an older man sat on a bench with tears in his eyes, feeling the poignancy in all the years he had lived. I couldn't move. Finally, I got up and crossed the traffic. "Man, you're really good. You just pierced me." He said, "That's a good thing, I hope?" That's a great thing. You made me feel my life. "Wow," he said, "Nothing like this has ever happened to me."

A few moments. An interruption of my plan. Life, loves, heartbreaks, hopes, passions of decades swept up and sung out by a young man on the street trying to figure out his life as a musician. Through this busker, God interrupted me with a sip of the sweet pain, the painful sweetness, of being alive.

Through years of barrenness, Hannah had been ridiculed by her rival who easily had child after child. She lived humiliated and ashamed. Against all odds, the LORD opened her womb and gave her a son. As she had promised, Hannah brought Samuel as a young child to the temple and offered him in the LORD's service. Her heart still overflowed in gratitude. She poured forth the song of praise we read earlier. This song has been sung for 3000 years at the beginning of the Jewish New Year. It celebrates the unique character of our God. There is no other god like ours. He creates the great reversals. He brings down the mighty. He lifts up the feeble. He humbles the proud, the ones who seem to hold the world in their hands, who seem always to get their way. And then he lifts the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap. The King of the universe regards the humble of heart, and turns our sorrows into triumphs.

The next day at the conference, I gave the first of the three one hour presentations and then led the evening worship. I went back to my room pretty exhausted from nerves and energy expended. I thought about just staying alone. But I knew the participants were socializing and that my work was to be among these people. I prayed for God to open me to whatever he had for me. I saw only one seat open in the little room, so I took it. People were all engaged in conversation, but the man across from me noticed me come in. His name was Duncan, and he turned his attention from the people talking and tried to catch me up on the topic. But as he did, we never returned to the group discussion. I kept realizing that I had choices: I could stay on the theology question at the surface of our talk. Or I could follow the hints about something more personal he wanted to say. After my experience with the busker, I was primed for more surprises from God. So instead of making my expert theological points, I asked some questions about Duncan's life.

In the course of the hour, he told me how it had only been in the last year that he had awakened to personal faith in Jesus. Duncan had known about Christianity all his life. His parents were missionaries. But for so long he had kept Jesus at arm's length. He knew about Christ but he did not relate to him. Rather, Duncan had grown cynical. He could see through the hypocrisy in the Christian community. And he could see through the hypocrisy in the secular save-the-world community. He worked as a botanist for a non-profit group, travelling around the world for research in how to encourage sustainable farming in developing countries. But he saw little hope that poverty could be improved or the earth's resources preserved. His cynicism led to depression, and his depression led to difficulty in his family. At a low point, Duncan said he finally prayed a real prayer. He asked God to show him if he was real. But he had a qualification. If you turn out to be just like the Jesus I always expected you were, the Jesus of the pretenders, I'm not going to do this.

Duncan said he began reading Bible passages about the dramatic encounters people had with the LORD. Once he read about Moses meeting God in the burning bush and being told to take off his sandals because he was on holy ground. Duncan asked in prayer, "Why do you have to take your shoes off before God?" The standard answer is because God is holy and we are sinful. Duncan already knew that. If that's all there was to the story, it left him cold. But into his mind came another reply. "Because to come before God you have to be naked. You have to know that you are completely known just for who you are."

Then Duncan recalled that when his missionary family lived in Indonesia, baths were a big procedure. There was no plumbing, so water for the bath had to be carried from the river. As each child took their turn in the tub, his parents would use a big ladle to scoop up the water and pour it over his back. The ladle pouring water over him in the tub was an indelible image from childhood. Duncan said that once in those days, as he prayed, into his mind came the image of that tub. Only this time it was Jesus pouring the water over him. Ladle after ladle, scoop after scoop washed over his head and back. It went on and on. In his imagination, Duncan finally looked up. He saw Jesus standing there smiling at him, then laughing. "Duncan," he said, "I can keep pouring this water over your back for as long as you like. But listen. You're already clean!" Duncan said, "This was nothing like I expected God to be. This was not the God of the old, stale Christianity. This was a Jesus who loved me for me and wanted me to know him."

The God of great reversals came to Duncan. He came to him through the gift of friends that continually called him out of darkness into the light of love and

acceptance. He came to Duncan through his Spirit as he read and prayed. Duncan kept discovering that his brokenness was not an impediment stopping God from arriving in his life. Rather, his weakness was the road along which God travelled. For Duncan, the song of Hannah was as true in AD2018 as it was in 1050BC

Talk no more so very proudly...for  
The bows of the mighty are broken,  
But the feeble bind on strength.

The LORD kills and brings to life;  
He brings down to Sheol and raises up.

He raises up the poor from the dust;  
He lifts the needy from the ash heap.

Our God rules over all things. He is steadily working in each of our lives, though often not by the means we would expect. We get all confused here about what it means to say that God is sovereign. On one hand, we can mistakenly think that everything is already fated. In this way of thinking, God is the puppet master pulling strings and we just have to put up with it. On the other hand, we can think that there must be some formula to how we get the God with power to give us what we want. If we are just good enough, and believe enough, he will bless us. If we are faithful, God simply has to give us the life we want. In both cases, fatalistic sovereignty or prosperity sovereignty, we end up crushingly disappointed. The fatalistic God seems cruel. The prosperity God seems to be playing a game we can't solve.

Hannah's life, and Duncan's life teach us something different. The Triune God of Grace works on a level far above our sight. He is working in our lives beyond every expectation. We can't get this God to do what we want. But we can learn two important markers. The proud will get taken down. Whenever I think I am self-sufficient, I am heading for a reversal. When I think I don't need the God who made me for himself, that I can solve my life myself, things will unravel. But in humility, in crying out from the brokenness that is inevitable in life, I discover how Christ lifts us from the dust. As the old song says, we can "trade ashes in for beauty and wear forgiveness like a crown."

Over and over in the course of ministry, I have heard people report words very similar to these, "I wouldn't wish what happened to me on worst enemy. I wouldn't trade what God has done through this for anything. I would never choose

to go through this. But I cherish the wounds that brought me so close to the savior.” He is the God of unexpected reversals just as much as he has always been.

Hannah’s prayer was an important part of Jewish life, the way we know how the angels said, “Peace on earth, good will toward men.” It would have been deeply embedded in the heart of a young Jewish girl named Mary. The angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce that she, a virgin, would soon be with child by the Holy Spirit. In the greatest unexpected reversal, the eternal God was going to step into our world as a baby from Mary’s womb. Mary knew to pray as Hannah had prayed, “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word.” In the months of her pregnancy, she must have thought over and over of Hannah’s prayer. Then, her own song just erupted from her, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my savior, for he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden...for he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name...He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. He has remembered his mercy.”

God did not forget Hannah. Nor Mary. Nor Duncan. Nor my busker on the streets of Edinburgh. He has not forgotten you. He still creates the great reversal. He pulls down our pride. He lifts us up in our weakness, our pain, our brokenness, our despair, our confusion, and our need. He gives us nothing less than himself. The God who emptied himself in Jesus Christ. Who was condemned in order to acquit us sinners. Who died in order to defeat death.

Will we be so bold as to take up the challenge my friend Duncan issued to the LORD? God, if you’re there, will you show yourself to me? But it can’t be in a way I expect, in a way that’s too shallow. Show me yourself so I know it’s you.