

22 PENTECOST
OCTOBER 15/16, 2016
(PSALM 46:10; LUKE 1:47-55)

I SAMUEL 1:1-20, 2:1-10
FIRST, MARSHALL
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

Through the Looking Glass

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.
Please join me in prayer: Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that
in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



Through the Looking Glass is the title of Lewis Carroll's sequel to the children's fantasy story Alice in Wonderland. *The sculpture you see on the screens is entitled "Alice through the Looking Glass." Crafted in 1989 by Jeanne Argent, it sits on the grounds of Guildford Castle in England – close to where Lewis Carroll, the author of the books, used to live.* (http://www.jeanneargent.co.uk/about_me/)

Some of you may know the story. One day Alice is playing with her black and white kittens (**you can see one in the sculpture**). She looks at them, then looks at herself in the mirror...and begins to wonder what life would be like on the opposite side. She goes to the mirror, reaches out, and discovers that she can enter this alternate world.

As you and I would expect, it's a strange way of life *in there*. Many of her basic assumptions are, in fact, the **mirror-image** of all that's familiar. In **Looking-Glass World**, *outcomes precede events, cakes are passed out before being cut, destinations are reached by walking in the opposite direction, and characters remember the future (before it ever happens)* (<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/themes.html>). The story is obviously defined by this upside-down, inside-out sort of logic.

A similar sort of truth is at work in today's story about Hannah. In fact, it's a theme that we've heard before – and will hear again. Sarah and Hannah in the Old Testament, Elizabeth and Mary in the New, at some very critical times God seems to choose women who could not, or, in some ways, should not, become pregnant. Yet still God blesses them with the gift of being mothers...all so that God could call their children to serve the cause of heaven on earth.

Such a dramatic turn of events gives these women an acute insight into the way that God works in *our* lives – in **all** of life – not only **occasionally**, but as a **rule** – and I do **NOT** mean that miraculous births are the rule. Far from it!



As you heard, Hannah is hurting:

-her husband's other wife, Penninah, is popping out babies right and left,

-yet her husband, Elkanah, who loves Hannah dearly, is pretty

clueless about her pain. **He** thinks that she should be happy, because, in Elkanah's *humble opinion*, **his** love should be worth more to her than **10 children!**

This is a heartache that is suffered by a significant number of women – a number of *couples* – who would love to experience the miracle of birth. Yet as painful as it is today, for women in the O.T. times, the pain went even deeper. A childless wife had no legal standing if her husband were to die. In Hannah's case, only Penninah and her children would be provided for – leaving Hannah's fate completely at the mercy of relatives, neighbors, strangers...

So **no one** appreciates Hannah's grief – and she's been carrying around this burden of pain and fear for year, after year, after year. She persistently prays for a baby – finally promising God that she'd raise the child for **his** service if he'd but grant her heart's desire.

Then to make matters **worse**, on **this** day when, once again, she's in the temple **praying**, when, once again, she's **opening** her **heart** to the Lord, when, once again, she's **pouring out** her **soul** to **God**, the priest Eli **sneers** at her and scolds Hannah because **he** thinks she's **drunk!** (We pastors can be an insensitive lot at times!).

Well, Hannah corrects Eli, and the priest has at least enough grace to give her the benefit of the doubt. In fact, he even ends-up encouraging her with this blessing: *Go in peace, may the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.*

For some reason, it works. Her heartache is healed, her pain has passed, her grief has gone away. It's almost as if she heard a voice from heaven whisper Psalm 46:10, ***Be still...and know that I am God.*** Hannah is...still. She goes ***in peace*** to love and serve the Lord. And, as her **serenity** seems to signal, in due time she becomes pregnant and delivers a health baby boy. Then, on the day her son Samuel is finally weaned, she honors her pledge to give him up in service to the Lord.



Centuries later, Jesus will tell a story that reflects the themes of this very real event. It's called the Parable of the **Unjust Judge**. **Can someone recount the details of that story for us?**

A woman pesters a judge who unjustly rejects her plea. He's bothered neither by **his dishonesty** nor by **her discontent**. In **fact**, the **only** thing that peeves the judge is the widow's **pugnacious persistence**.

Finally, he's had it up to here because she just **won't give up**, **won't back down**, **will** not go *away*! He relents and rules in her favor, **not** because it's the **right** thing to do, but because it's the **only** thing that'll get her off his back.

According to Jesus, the point of the parable is...**persistence**. He says that we are to persist in our prayers to God, who will *grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him night and day* (Luke 18:7). Hannah did. She: **wept bitterly**, she **prayed persistently**, she **prevailed** over an **authority figure** who treated her **badly** – and it **worked!**

So, is that how we're supposed to interpret Hannah's story? If we want something bad enough all we have to do is cry-and-pray hard enough and God will grant our hearts' desire?

No, because we've **all** known **times** – or **people** – in our lives who have **wept bitter tears**, **laid bare** the **depths** of **their** hearts and **poured out** **their** souls to God, **without** receiving the answer they had so desired.



The key, I think, for us here is this: this story is much **less** about **Hannah's son**, and much **more** about **Hannah's song**. **After** she leaves little Samuel with the priest Eli, **after** she honors her pledge to God, **after** she commits her child to a

special life of serving the Lord, she sings an **amazing** song of praise. Here's a recap of what she sings:

¹*My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.*

²*There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you;*

there is no Rock like our God.

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.*

I found three things about this song to be very interesting:

- 1) In it, Hannah never even **mentions** the baby she was given.
– instead she praises God for the **big picture** things of life.
- 2) Her song's theme reveals a God who works in a *through-the-looking-glass* manner, *upside-down, inside-out, last-shall-be-first* sorts of ways.
- 3) It's very similar to the song that will be sung by a spiritual sister centuries later – Mary, after she hears from the angel that she'll give birth to the Christ child. Both women **get it** about the mysterious ways of God:

Where the world honors the **lofty**, God lifts-up the **lowly**;

Where the world honors the **laudable**, God embraces the **least**;

Where the world honors the **first**, God seems to prefer the **last**;

Where the world honors the **popular**, God befriends the **lonely**.

Connie and Angela will sing the Angel's Annunciation from the Holden Evening Prayer service, and then we'll all join in singing Mary's song, the Magnificat...

**My soul proclaims
your greatness, O God
and my spirit rejoices in you
You have looked with love
on your servant here
and blessed me
all my life through**



**Great and mighty
are you, O Holy One
strong is your kindness
evermore
How you favor the weak
and lowly one
humbling the proud of heart**



**You have cast the mighty
down from their thrones
and uplifted
the humble of heart
You have filled the hungry
with wondrous things
and left the wealthy no part**



**Great and mighty
are you, O Faithful One
strong is your justice
strong your love
As you promised
to Sarah and Abraham
kindness forevermore**



My soul proclaims
 your greatness, O God
 and my spirit rejoices in you
 You have looked with love
 on your servant here
 and blessed me
 all my life through



Hannah, and Mary after her, sing what **all** people throughout the ages have come to know about the beautifully strange way that God often works in life. At its heart, these songs are **much more** about **God's** desire to save the **world** than it is about **their** desire to have a **baby**...

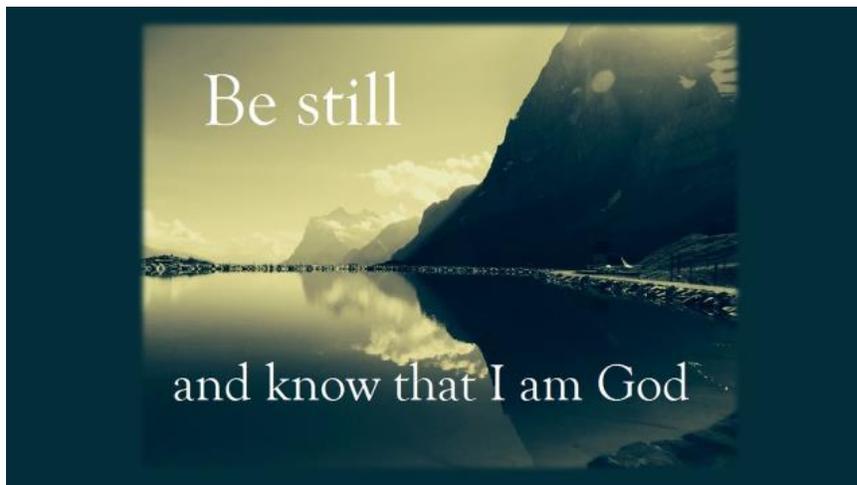
Look back at the cast of Bible characters we've met so far this fall:

- Abraham and Sarah**, nomads from the desert through whom God promises to bless all the families on earth
- Joseph**, a former spoiled child/slave/convict, whom God uses to save his people – and his plan for the whole world
- Moses**, a reluctant leader whom God uses to free the People of the Promise
- And now **Hannah**, an infertile wife, who's **child** God will use to anoint **kings**, and whose **song** will inspire the **mother** of **Jesus**.

This is **good** news, this is **great** news, this **is**, in fact, **fantastic** news for ordinary folk like you and me, **and** for virtually **everyone else** we will ever know or meet: **God takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary**. God takes what is **common**...and makes it **uncommonly good!** And **most** of all, God takes **people** who are **flawed**, and through **them/us!** works heaven's **perfect** will so that **all** people might be blessed by the good and gracious will of God.

We are not Alice looking in a mirror, this is not some children's make-believe story. This is the **truth** about how God works in **your life** and in **mine**.

This is the **truth** in which **we** are called to **trust**, that God **knows** our sufferings, that God **hears** our prayers, and that God promises to **put** them – **and us** – **to use** answering that petition from the Lord's Prayer: *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven...*



The **difficulty** for us is to **live** in that trust. Even the Apostle Paul talks about this challenge in I Cor. 13:12-13. Says this wholly human saint: *Now we see through a glass darkly, but **then** we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; **then** I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

So:

- when we get it about us, that now we see through a glass darkly,
- when we get it about God, that we are fully known and loved,
- when we get it about faith, hope and love...

Then we'll be able to let go of life's cares, entrust them to the Lord, and daily embrace God's truth spoken to us through Psalm 46:

Be still, and know that I am God.

Amen.