

A little over one thousand years before the birth of Mary of Nazareth, there lived another woman in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Bethlehem in Judah. Her name was Hannah, and she was married to a man named Elkanah. Elkanah had two wives, and the other one, Peninah, bore him children. Hannah was barren, however, and this was a source of deep pain and misery to her, as well as to Elkanah, who loved her very much. So one year, when Elkanah had taken his whole family up to Shiloh to worship the LORD of hosts, Hannah went into the temple of the LORD and prayed from her heart that the LORD would grant her a child. If the LORD *did* grant her a child, she would have him dedicated to the service of the LORD.

When Elkanah and his family returned to their home in Ramah, lo and behold, Hannah *did* conceive, and in due course, she bore a son, whom she called Samuel, which means, "name of God". Hannah kept her part of the agreement, too. At the time that she weaned Samuel, she took him up to the temple in Shiloh, and presented him to Eli, the priest there. And when she presented Samuel, Hannah worshiped the LORD with a song. She sang this: "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in the LORD; my mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in thy salvation. ... 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 have ceased to hunger. ... The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings lo, 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." (1 Samuel 2: 1,4-5, 7-8) This is what Hannah sang in praising God. Hannah's story is a salvation story. New life comes out of barrenness. Hope rises from hopelessness. Despair is transformed into thanksgiving and praise.

Hannah's story is also, in part, Israel's story. Threatened by external enemies and internal corruption, Israel's future at the time of Hannah's story is bleak. By trusting her plight to God, Hannah claimed the new future God can make possible to those in barren, hopeless situations. The birth of Samuel to a barren woman who boldly asks for God's grace, gives hope that God can transform Israel's future even as Hannah's future is transformed. Hannah's son, Samuel, is to play a central role in God's plan. God remembered Hannah. God will once again remember Israel.

Perhaps in listening to parts of Hannah's song - which is found in First Samuel, Chapter 2, you hear the similarities between it and Mary's song, which we have come to call, "The Magnificat". "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46-47) What's interesting about the connection, is that Hannah's story is much more parallel to Elizabeth's story, than to Mary's. Both Elizabeth and Hannah were older, barren women. Hannah was assured of a child at the temple just as Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, was. Both sons, Samuel in the one case and John the Baptist in the other, were given to God under special vows, and they lived as set apart for God. What's more, the tradition of God granting a son to elderly childless couples is well established in Scripture. Abraham and Sarah were given Isaac. Manoah and his wife were given Samson. Elkanah and Hannah were granted Samuel.

In that tradition of God blessing the barren now comes Elizabeth, and her priest-husband, Zechariah. They are both "righteous before God" (Luke 1:6), but they have no children. An angel of the Lord appears to Zechariah in the sanctuary of the Lord where he is serving, and announces that they will, in fact, have a son. Zechariah doesn't believe the angel, and so is struck dumb. But Elizabeth knows she has conceived, and for the first five months of her pregnancy, she remains in seclusion.

When the unmarried, pregnant, girl cousin Mary comes to visit Elizabeth in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, the two women greet one another warmly. Now if you've been following the pattern, it will have already occurred to you that *Elizabeth* should be the one to

break out into song, praising God in the tradition of Hannah for God's graciousness to the barren. It does not fit for a young virgin to sing Hannah's song. *But she does!* This is *Mary's* song! "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" Had Elizabeth sung Hannah's song, it would have been said that God continues to be gracious to the barren, as of old. But when a song from that tradition is sung by a young virgin, the tradition is interrupted, the old is new, and the familiar is strange. God is doing a new thing! When *Mary* sings, rather than Elizabeth, it must be said that God's grace is not as of old, but new and strange and surprising and beyond understanding. This child will not be as Isaac or Samson or Samuel. This child will be the Son of God! And Mary - the lowly, unwed, mother-to-be, *recognizes* that newness; *claims* it; and *praises the Source and Giver* of this radical, new thing.

And what is it that Mary sings? Her song opens with joy and praise that God has favored a handmaiden of low estate. But only briefly does she speak of herself. She sees God's grace and goodness toward her as but a single instance of the way of God in the world. God blesses the poor and oppressed and hungry. And in the final, eschatological reversal, God will bring down the proud and rich oppressors and exalt those who have been disenfranchised, disregarded, and dismissed.

Mary's song is a great challenge to us today, in its radicality, and in its reversals. In the United States, most of us may find ourselves on the side of the equation that will lose entitlements and privileges in the great reversal. But we must also remember that Mary's song is about *reversals*, not *replacements*. Reversal, not replacement, is at the heart of God's way with both the People of Israel and with the Gentiles. So we must ask ourselves, What kind of reversals does God call us to? Are we open to them? When God, at last raises up the disregarded and the oppressed, will our own pride and arrogance fall? When God, in the end, gives a feast to those who have been hungry all of their lives, will we who are well fed right now, at last, see the emptiness inside?

But Mary's song is, above all else, a reminder of God's faithfulness. It is a song that demonstrates God's fidelity to Israel. Only in the recognition that God keeps God's promises to the Jewish people can we, as Christians, have confidence in God's fidelity to us. And God is doing a new thing - not just in the past - but right now! Do we recognize this newness? What do we need to do to let God's newness come into our lives? How will Christ be born again in the very souls of our beings? Not just at Christmastime, but on a daily basis! One thing is sure: God is always doing a new thing. It is ours to *recognize*; to *claim* that newness; and to *praise the Source and Giver* of it all.

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