

*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....  
 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....  
 The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;  
 he will give strength to his king,  
 and exalt the power of his anointed.'*  
 (1 Samuel 2.1, 7-8, 10b)



Hannah and Samuel

Devotion by Philip Forness  
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The book of Samuel begins with the story of Hannah. Hannah, who lives in the countryside of Ephraim, is the beloved wife of an Israelite man who yearly showers her with gifts out of his love for her. Her life seems to be wonderful, except that she suffers from barrenness and because of this barrenness she is mocked. Despite her prayers every year for a child, Hannah has not yet been able to conceive. Then one year, Hannah offers up a new prayer; this time she promises that if God will grant her request she will dedicate her child to God's service. God answers Hannah's prayer, and she gives birth to Samuel.

Hannah's song, as we read above, is her joyful response to the healing that God has brought in her life. She not only rejoices over those who mocked her, showing God's love for the poor and oppressed, but also anticipates what God will accomplish through her son: "*The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.*" At Hannah's time, as the book of Judges tells us, "*there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*" God did not only heal Hannah's womb, but brought healing to all Israel through her son Samuel. Samuel would anoint the first two kings of Israel and thereby provide the answer to the problems that the book of Judges saw.

Hannah's song is particular relevant for us at this time of year because another woman in the first century in the Judean countryside would sing a song based on Hannah's shortly after she learned that she too would give birth to a son. Mary's song of praise (Luke 1.46b-55), as we heard in Advent, also praises God for his favor for the lowly and oppressed. Mary's son would, like Samuel, bring deliverance to Israel and all nations by destroying the powers of darkness on a cross--the cross on which he was enthroned as the King of the Jews.

Mary's use of Hannah's song reminds that Christ's coming was marked by this very message of love for the poor and oppressed. During the seasons of Advent and Christmas, we see many visible signs of people caring for the poor and oppressed all around us. We hear the clanging of bells as we enter stores to remind us of the needy and homeless. We are reminded by the Toys for Tots charity of the needy children around us. And the Angel Tree ministry reminds us of those physical walls and bars that separate us from people that like us need God's message of mercy. As we transition together out of the season of Christmas when some of the physical reminders to care for the poor and oppressed disappear, let us heed the songs of these two women whose stories are integral to God's actions in the world. As we go toward the season of Epiphany in which we celebrate the Gospel as it spread to all nations, let us continue to take part in showing God's love for the poor and oppressed by remembering the witness of Hannah and Mary. Let us sing along with Mary:

*'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
 and holy is his name.  
 His mercy is for those who fear him  
 from generation to generation.  
 He has shown strength with his arm;  
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
 and lifted up the lowly;  
 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
 and sent the rich away empty.  
 He has helped his servant Israel,  
 in remembrance of his mercy,  
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'*  
 (Luke 1.46b-55)

The painting is Hannah and Samuel  
 From The Women of the Bible by Margaret Sangster, pub. 1911  
 Painted by Constant Joseph Brochart in 1873