

## *None Like the Lord*

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Psalm 16; 1 Samuel 2:1-10  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
November 14, 2021

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," sang Mother Mary in Luke 1, in the months before she gave birth to our Lord Jesus. Mother Mary's song, widely known by its Latin name, the *Magnificat*, is a song of great joy, but it is not joy in a sociological vacuum. Mary's joy derives from the way that God has looked with favor on her, on one who was very low. Her joy, the song goes on, derives from the way that God displaces those who are in brutal control – ones like Pharaoh in Egypt or Caesar in Rome – and lifts up the lowly. Her joy derives from the way that God has pronounced judgment upon those who hoarded the community's resources for themselves, and has filled those in need with good things. Mary's joy comes from a God who is like no other.

Mary did not make this up all on her own. She learned her song from her ancestor Hannah, whose song we read today in 1 Samuel 2. All of us stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, and the mother of our Lord is no exception. Mary's ancestor Hannah was also very low, and the Lord looked with favor on her. So Hannah sang, "My heart exults in the Lord, my strength is exalted in my God." Hannah also sings of how the weapons of the mighty have been broken by God, while the ones who were weak and feeble have been girded with strength. The Lord, says Hannah, makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. Hannah was a strong Reformed theologian, because she sings all about the sovereignty of God.

At the beginning of her song, Hannah announces, "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." None like the Lord. We may imagine, from Hannah's song, that it is not just God's power that makes God distinctive. After all, every god in the ancient world, just like every superpower in our modern world, wants you to be awed by their power and their ferocious strength. There is nothing particularly interesting about a god claiming to be powerful. What makes the Lord distinctive, what sets the Lord apart, according to Hannah, and according to Moses, and according to the psalms, and according to Jesus, is that God's sovereignty is matched by *God's proximity to pain*. God's nearness to those who are hurting, God's solidarity with the weak ones, God's self-identification with the outsider and the vulnerable and the hurting ones, that is what makes our God like no other. Every god, every ruling power wants to tell you that they have the answers to all your problems, that they are winners. In Egypt, Pharaoh wanted to be in total control. The Babylonian gods that are celebrated in the *Enuma elish* myth want to claim power and might and sovereignty. Emperors and kings and royal powers always want you to be in awe of their power and their military capacity. This is why they strut across the world and

flaunt their really big swords and guns. Those gods want to have nothing to do with the poor.

What makes the God of Israel such an anomaly among the gods, the reason why Hannah can say there is no Holy One like the Lord, is because of God's proximity to those in pain and God's nearness to the broken-hearted. No other god does that. God notices people who are lonely. God sees the ones who have been pushed around and who are being ignored. God is attentive to the feeble, the hungry, the barren, the poor, the needy. We may imagine that the other gods are trying to shore up their support by recruiting wealthy sponsors and donors, shiny, happy people who can make really big contributions. But while they're in the ballroom, cozying up to the rich and famous, the God of Israel is out back, paying attention to the neglected ones. This is why Jesus announces in Luke 4 that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to bring good news to the poor.

Scripture teaches us that God's proximity to pain is good news of great joy for all the people. If God's sovereignty were only concerned with maintaining power, then it would only be good news for those who held power. If God's glory was only about maintaining the status quo, then it would only be good news for those who do not want things to change. But God's grace and God's glory intend the reconciliation of all people, the salvation of the world, the healing of the nations, and the transformation of every system that is crushing God's children. God intends for there to be shalom for everyone, where lions and lambs eat together, where no one will hurt or destroy anymore.

God's proximity to pain is the taproot and source of the church's ministries of care. The reason why the church reaches out in ministries of mercy and tender care is because we are created in the image of God, who reaches out in mercy and tender care. Because God lives in proximity to pain, so do we. In just a few minutes, we're going to get to hear from some of our Deacons and Stephen Ministers about their experiences from participating in these ministries.

I have experienced this myself in the last several weeks. The empires of the world do not know what to do with those who are suffering, those who are grieving. The empires of the world tell people to keep a stiff upper lip, keep yourself busy and distracted, and that you should be embarrassed if people see you cry. But when your dad is dying, when one of the anchors of your identity is drawing his last breaths, that kind of advice is absurd. Reality is hard, and life is difficult. Empires may tell people those things, but you in the church haven't. You have drawn near to me during these days of loss with gentleness and patience.

You have been a sacrament for me of the mercies of God. God's proximity to pain is what makes God distinctive, and the church's willingness to live in proximity to pain is what makes the church distinctive. The empires of the world avoid pain and grief

and sadness because empires think that the future is won through strength and force and power. Empires cannot imagine that anything enduring can come from experiences of loss. But the church knows better. The church knows that loss and grief have always been. the birthplace of God's newness. By the grace of God, crucifixion leads to resurrection, exile leads to homecoming, and grief leads to comfort. No other god is like that.