

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Talkin' 'Bout A Revolution
Mark 13.1-18 and 1 Samuel 2.1-10
November 14, 2021

Our reading this morning from Mark 13 comes at the end of Jesus' ministry and life, and as he moves toward the end, he is moving, of course, toward the cross. And as Jesus moves toward the cross and toward his suffering, his mind, his thoughts, and his words begin to take on the reality of his coming suffering. But as they do, they don't just embody his own personal suffering, but he sees God's work in all of this. He sees a future for himself and for the world. He sees in cosmic terms--the world that is ending and the world that is being born. Jesus speaks of these terms as he does in Mark 13.

It's like he's saying, "I have a wonderful story to tell you—or at least I have a story with a wonderful ending to tell you. But there's a lot between now and the ending of that story." And in like terms, I have a wonderful story to share with you this morning, but it is one that begins in trouble and in suffering and in pain.

In the 1970s, a young black Baptist girl was growing up in Cleveland, Ohio. Her parents divorced when she was 4 years old. They were poor. She was bullied and endured racially motivated assaults throughout her childhood. But she endured, she was smart, and she was gifted. When she was in high school someone noticed and offered her scholarship to attend a college preparatory high school in Danbury, Connecticut. She accepted, and it was a very different world.

So, this girl left the streets of Cleveland and moved to Danbury with a lot of uncertainties and the guitar her mother bought her when she was 8. She was a natural on the guitar, playing and writing songs inspired in part by watching the tv show *Hee-Haw*. This *Hee-Haw*-watching, guitar-playing Cleveland girl landed at boarding school in Connecticut. And it was hard. Her classmates and the other people she met there weren't concerned about the kind of place she came from. She said, "A lot of them thought that... they didn't think that people's lives who..., people who didn't have money or who were working class, their lives weren't very significant, and they also somehow couldn't make a change. But I feel that's where change comes from... where people are in most need." (<http://www.about-tracy-chapman.net/video-tracy-chapman-talks-about-and-sing-talkinbout-a-revolution-in-1986/>)

At 16 years old in the middle of that lonely experience, far from home, all alone, but with those convictions burning inside her, she wrote a song with those people in mind--the people no one is paying attention to, the people overlooked, pushed down, the people who need a fair shake and a fair share in life. She was 16, but she was thinking about old people and young people and young mothers and unemployed fathers. The song was born out of her broken heart and sense of isolation as she encountered a world indifferent and disconnected to the plight of the poor. In the song she wrote, she fantasizes about a revolution, a day when poor and oppressed

people rise up and get their share. I'm talking about a revolution, she sings. *You better run. You better run, run, run, run, run, run, run. You better run. I'm talking about a revolution.*

The revolution she was talking and dreaming about was even more basic than poor people could become wealthy. It was a dream simply that people could have hope in the face of systems that systematically crushed any hope they had. The poor would rise up; oppressive systems would crumble and fall.

Where did she get such radical ideas? Well, I'm going to take a guess that that Baptist girl, alone in her dorm room had been reading her Bible at night, and I'm going to take a guess that one day, her Bible fell open to 1 Samuel, where she read about a young girl named Hannah, probably about the same age as she was. She would have leaned in a little closer to the page reading about how Hannah was verbally abused and mocked by people who were supposed to be on her side. She read about how Hannah went to pray at the tabernacle and even the priest misunderstood her and told her to knock it off because he thought she was drunk, pouring out her heart to God like that. She read about how God gave Hannah the child she dreamed of having. And then she read Hannah's song, 1 Samuel 2, and it spoke to her heart.

Hannah gives thanks for her son named Samuel and dedicates him to the Lord. "My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high." She also sings about victory—her own and the people of Israel and the victory of all people suffering. Something is being born here, a baby and a new world. A new world is about to be born in Hannah's melody. A world in which the weapons of the mighty are broken and the weak are made strong. Those who are overfed will survive on bread while those who hunger are filled. The Lord will raise up the low, the poor from the dust, the needy from the ash heap. "The Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth." Let us hear clearly: in the time of the Judges, when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, a time when the leaders were corrupt, and the institutions that were supposed to ensure justice and create righteousness were crumbling, Hannah was seeing and singing a revolution.

Scripture is full of messages like this. Promises that God is on the side of the suffering, the oppressed, the poor, and God is about to bring something new. Moses leads a revolution of slaves against their Egyptian masters. Elijah leads a revolution against the corruption in the king's palace to return the people to God. The prophets all thunder that the worship of God is rightly sung by people who call on God's name and lived out God's love for God's hurting people.

I saw this week that Pope Francis made a return visit to Assisi, his first since the beginning of the pandemic, the town so many of us have visited. He loves that place like all of us who have been. There he met with some of the cloistered nuns of Clare in the chapel of Santa Chiara where so many of us have prayed together before the cross of St. Francis. There he prayed with them and encouraged them to pray for the church and for Christians everywhere to have a serene heart, hands that work and serve, and to ask for forgiveness of sins. He prayed with

them for the poor of the world and for the church's mission to serve, and not be served. He means Christians should hear again the song that goes all the way back to Hannah.

You know who heard Hannah's song? Another young woman feeling all alone in a dangerous world at a dangerous time, another era when leaders were corrupt and institutions failed, another young woman with a fire burning in her bones and a baby in her womb. A young girl who sings her own song: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior... he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones, exalted those of humble estate, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty." Mary's song, Mary's Magnificat. Mary's also talking about a revolution. With the arrival of her son, she sees a new world being born. God is doing something new. God is going to make things right. Mary's song, like Hannah's song is liberation music that 'anticipates a just world in which war weapons are broken, the hungry are full, the poor are lifted from the ashes, arrogant speech is judged by God, and corrupt religious dynasties fall.' (Allen, Andrews, ed, *Preaching God's Transformative justice, Year B*, 496)

We read Hannah's song today; in six weeks on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we read Mary's song. We live in a time between the verses of God's liberating music through these women. From today until then, our readings each Sunday are texts with a revolutionary spirit. They are about Jesus and his rule and God's heart for the suffering and God's purposes in the earth and God's purposes for his people and God's eschatological victory over evil. They are about social reversals and about seeing the world as God sees the world. As we come to the end of this liturgical year, next Sunday on Christ the King Sunday, and begin the season of Advent, the following week, for the next six weeks, we are given texts through the lectionary that are about letting it be on earth as it is in heaven.

The disciples in today's Gospel reading, thought they'd come to heaven on earth that day in Jerusalem, "Look Jesus, what wonderful stones these are! What magnificent buildings." Look you guys, Jesus replied, look again, do you see what I see? Those stones ...those stones, assembled on top of one another by King Herod, those stones are coming down. The world that Rome has built cannot contain and cannot stop the kingdom I am bringing. Come with me. The walls of corrupt, unjust institutions are coming down. The world is changing, and not one will be left on standing on one another. The pillars that prop up the empires of this world are being toppled. The reign of death is coming to an end; the rule of darkness is over; the way of light is dawning.

When, Jesus? When? When will this happen? Those stones look so big, those walls look so massive. The shadows are so long. Just watch. Keep alert. You'll know, Don't be afraid. Your ears and your eyes will be full of noise: when the pillars of the earth begin to fall, the ground under us all trembles. But do not be afraid. All of this is just the beginning, the beginning of birth pains.

Birth pains. Where there are birth pains, there is pain (I'm told). But where there are birth pains, new life is coming, we're told. These two young women, two young mothers--Hannah

and Mary prophesied the purposes of God fulfilled in the world and gave to us the music of liberation, the hopeful songs of revolution. And a young Baptist girl all alone in a place where no one cared, had that music, God's music, in her bones, too, and the world would soon sing with her.

On June 11, 1988, a massive crowd gathered at London's Wembley Stadium for the Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute, and Tracy Chapman was invited to be one of the minor performers to play a few songs on a side stage to keep the show going as major acts set up on the main stage for their longer sets. Mandela himself would not be in attendance as he was still imprisoned in South Africa as he had been for 26 years, accused of attempts to overthrow the oppressive, racist apartheid government. The Mandela birthday tribute was a spotlight shining on the south African oppressive regime though organizers were studiously careful to be sure the all-day concert was positive and wasn't overtly "political" lest some American companies pull back their sponsorship and one major broadcaster refuse to show it. As it was one major American broadcaster showed the concert on tape delay and cut out just about every comment and every song that was remotely about justice or freedom or Nelson Mandela. Whitney Houston made the show. So did UB40 and the Bee Gees. (Half of you will have to look all these people up.) They were all were palatable enough to an entertainment seeking audience without ruffling any feathers.

Stevie Wonder was scheduled to play as the headliner of the event, the final act to bring down the house. Stevie Wonder was huge at the time. Huge. But something went wrong. A computer disk containing all the instrumentals to Stevie Wonder's playlist went missing just before he was to go on. They couldn't find it anywhere; he was distraught. Inconsolable and left the stadium in tears. As someone whose music had been banned in South Africa because he had spoken out against apartheid, playing this concert meant the world to him. Organizers had to do something quick. This was the largest concert in the world. 600 million people in 67 nations were watching. Tracy Chapman had played a set earlier in the day and now was just was standing there off stage waiting to catch a glimpse of one of her heroes, Stevie Wonder. Will you go on again, they asked? She agreed.

Chapman is a shy, out of the limelight kind of person. This is not Freddy Mercury of Queen putting on the show of a generation. She's more coffee house than rock concert; she is quiet, soft-spoken. Her music it is said bypasses the ears and goes straight to the heart.

She stepped out on the main stage this time, and began to strum her acoustic guitar. And then in that soulful voice, that young girl's hopeful song of liberation, God's song, hovered over the crowd like a dove. And the world sang with her.

Don't you know, I'm talking about a revolution. Sounds like a whisper.

And somewhere off stage, Hannah harmonized,

"There is no one holy like the Lord;
 there is no one besides you;
 there is no Rock like our God. . .
 He raises the poor from the dust
 and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
 he seats them with princes
 and has them inherit a throne of honor."

Don't you know, I'm talking about a revolution; it sounds like a whisper.

And somewhere off stage, Mary sang melody:

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;

Don't you know, something is being born, something new. God is still God over all the earth.

Two years after the concert, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. A year later, the walls in Berlin crumbled and communism fell. And four years after that the flag of apartheid south Africa was lowered, free and fair elections ushered in a new era, through which he would be elected president. The end of apartheid was one large earthquake shaking the pillars of a world Jesus came to redeem.

The song goes on and on. Because the hope of Christ is being born in the world even now. A new song, new life, new hope, a new world will be born. So, lift up your eyes. Stay awake. Stay alert. Do not be afraid. Lift up your hearts. Lift up your voices in a song or... a whisper.

Lift your voice with Hannah, with Mary, with Jesus, and let your voice join the choir of white robed saints who sing forever heaven's song of hope: *They shall hunger no more, nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, no scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of them will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

May it be on earth as it is in heaven.
 May it be in us as it is in Christ's heart.

Amen.