

**September 26, 2004**  
**1 Samuel 2:1-10, Luke 16:19-31**  
**Dr. Lewis Galloway**

**“The Topsy-Turvey God”**

I have always loved books. I love the feel of them, the shape of them and even the smell of them. When I am browsing in a bookstore, I can lose all sense of time and place. Before moving to Indiana, one of the most difficult things was thinning out my books. I found I could give away furniture, clothes and household things, but I found it really difficult to part with books. For weeks before our move, Bunny was forever slipping books into the “give away” boxes. As soon as she turned her back, I would try to rescue as many as I could before the boxes left the house.

For all of my love of books, I know there are many things that cannot be learned from books. Some things come to us as we sift through our life experiences. As we seek to make sense of our lives, we find that although each day consists of the same 24 hour period of time, not all days are alike in significance. Each year consists of 12 months, but not all years feel the same. There are rhythms to life. There are moments in our childhood that we remember as if they happened yesterday; there are things we did last week that we have already forgotten. There are experiences that stand out like a raised pattern woven into the otherwise smooth fabric of our days. We trace these patterns with the nimble figures of our minds to make sense of the whole cloth of life.

Hannah is a woman whose life experiences taught her many things. She is the beloved wife of Elkanah, who is a good and faithful Jewish man. As the book of Samuel opens, Hannah is troubled. She weeps continuously and refuses to eat. Hannah is barren, unable to have a child with her husband Elkanah. To make matters worse, her husband’s other wife, Peninnah, who has many children, mocks and torments Hannah. Even though Elkanah comforts Hannah, treats her with great kindness and gives her everything she needs, Hannah’s sadness remains. In her culture to be without children is to be cut off from the blessings of God. No matter how much Elkanah professes his love for her, Hannah feels that her life is worthless. Hannah’s life experiences have taught her just how hard and full of disappointment life can be.

During their annual visit to the temple at Shiloh, Hannah prays a desperate prayer for God to give her a child. If the Lord will bless her with a child, then she will give the child to the Lord to serve in the temple. Seeing Hannah’s emotional state, the priest Eli thinks that Hannah is drunk and is defiling the holy place. Hannah declares that she is not drunk but praying faithfully. Eli tells Hannah that the Lord will answer her prayer and she will have a child. Hannah feels God lift her burden and her sadness is gone. She eats and goes away in peace. Even before she conceives the child, Hannah finds peace in God’s promise. When the baby Samuel is born, Hannah offers this song of praise to God.

My heart exults in the Lord;

My strength is exalted in my God...

The Lord makes poor and makes rich;

The Lord brings low, the Lord also exalts.

The Lord raises up the poor from the dust;

The Lord lifts the needy from the ash heap,

To make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. (2:1,6-8)

Hannah discovers the pattern of God's activity in the fabric of the life of the world.

Her song, which opens the entire history of Israel as a Kingdom, serves as a kind of key to understanding the rise and fall of the kings of Israel and the destiny of the nation itself. Throughout the history of Israel, God is continuously lifting up the lowly and bringing down the proud. Even more than this, Hannah's song becomes the pattern for the song Mary sings when the angel Gabriel tells her that she will be the mother of Jesus, the one who will come to save the people in distress. Hannah's song that praises the God who lifts up the poor and brings down the proud becomes our song. When the world brings you down, God will lift you up!

Jesus tells a parable about a man named Lazarus who suffers all of his life. Lazarus has nothing. His body is covered with sores. He lies at the gate of a rich man's house. The rich man seems totally oblivious to Lazarus's condition. The world has brought him low. Even the dogs lick his wounds. When he dies, the angels carry him to the bosom of Abraham where he finally finds peace. The rich man spends his resources in sumptuous living. When he dies, he goes to Sheol where he is in torment. Abraham reminds the rich man that he had everything during his life and Lazarus had nothing. Now God has reversed the state of affairs. The implication is that the rich man could have shared his abundant resources with Lazarus. Now it is too late. Even though Moses and the prophets gave plenty of warnings about the ways of God and the right uses of wealth, he ignored it all. Raymond Brown has written, "The proud look down on others because they do not look up to God (*The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 337)." The rich man learns too late the most important truth of all. God will lift up the poor and the lowly and bring down the rich and the proud.

All around us we see the places where God's children are brought low. Just this week James L. Davis, a young 31-year-old husband and father, in the course of his duty as a security officer at Butler University is shot dead by a man engaged in suspicious activity at the school. The violence of our society and the cruel disregard for life are not the way God wants things to be. Over 1,000 people in Haiti have lost their lives as a result of Hurricane flooding, hundreds more are missing, and thousands face starvation and disease. Last Sunday afternoon we heard about the Civil War in the

Sudan and how the government is brutally killing and starving tens of thousands of its citizens. This is not God's way in the world.

A Brazilian mother kept a diary that was published some years ago under the title *Child of the Dark*. In the diary the mother describes the family's struggle to survive in the slums of Sao Paulo by selling scrap metal.

Today I am nervous. At dawn it was raining. I couldn't go out to get any money... When Joao came home from school, I sent him to sell the scrap. He got 13 cruzeiros. He bought a glass of mineral water for 2 cruzeiros. I was furious with him. The money didn't stretch far enough to buy meat, so I cooked macaroni with a carrot. I didn't have any grease so it was horrible. Vera was the only one who complained, yet asked for more. "Mama," she said, "Sell me to Dona Julita, because she has delicious food."

This is not God's way in the world.

When the world brings you down, God will lift you up. There are folks here today who are so worn out by the struggle to hold their families together, to care for their children, to find a job, to pay the utility bills that they are on the edge of breaking down. If this is you, Jesus is saying to you today, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." There are those among us who have been brought low by illness and are afraid of dying. Jesus says to you today, "Those who believe in me shall never die." There are people here today who suffer from broken relationships, betrayal and abuse and who feel all alone. Jesus says to you today, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age." When the world brings you down, God will lift you up.

Even as we see the ways in which the world brings us down, we also see how God is working to lift people up. We see people who are working to make our neighborhoods safer and to teach people how to resolve their problems through negotiation not violence. We see how the New Sudan Council of Churches is working tirelessly to show God's way in the world by bringing relief, reconciliation and peace to the war torn Sudan. We see church groups and many agencies working together to bring relief and hope to the victims of devastating hurricanes. With every gift of food, medicine and fresh water, they are giving the message that the people who have nothing are loved and valued by God. Members of our congregation are serving as tutors and mentors to the children in the after school program at Westminster Church in the near east side. They want more than anything else for the children to know that Jesus loves them and what happens to them matters to God.

Ron Sider has written in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, "There are millions of Christians in affluent lands who care more about Jesus than anything else in the world. There are millions of Christians who will take any risk, make any sacrifice, forsake any treasure, if they see clearly that God's Word demands it." You are those Christians.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the American Catholic Workers movement, devoted herself to making life more abundant for the working poor and unemployed. At one point in her childhood, her family lived in poverty in Chicago. Yet, she managed to find beauty in simple things. "Drab streets were transformed by pungent odors: geranium and tomato plants, garlic, olive oil, roasting coffee, bread and rolls in bakery ovens. 'Here,' she said, 'was enough beauty to satisfy me.'" She began to develop "hospitality houses" where the homeless were welcome to live. She wrote that her guests were "grey men, the color of lifeless trees and bushes and winter soil, who had in them as yet none of the green of hope, the rising sap of faith." ("A Biography of Dorothy Day" by Jim Forest, prepared for the *Encyclopedia of American Catholic History*). She devoted her life to lifting up the lowly. I think she had it just about right when she said, "The best thing to do with the best things in life is to give them away."

When I began this sermon, I said that there are some things that only life can teach us. That is not exactly true. Unless we are given some insight from beyond ourselves, we may look at our lives and never see the pattern that God has woven into the very fabric of the world. There is one book that is necessary to see our lives clearly. The Bible is the one book we dare not let slip out of the house when we are trying to pare down our "stuff." The Bible tells us about this topsy-turvy God who brings down the proud and lifts up the lowly. In fact, the rich man and his brothers in the parable had heard about this God all their lives, but they never paid any serious attention to God's ways. They thought they could do things their way, spend their lives in sumptuous living and come out "all right" in the end. You might say they gambled and lost everything. They thought they were winning.

Jesus says that there are some people who just won't listen to the truth even if somebody comes back from the dead to tell it, which is, by the way, the very thing Jesus did.