

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Walking in Love”  
Dr. John Judson  
December 19, 2021

1 Samuel 2:1-10  
Luke 1:46-56

The year was 1953. He had packed his duffle bag, put on civilian clothes, walked out of the gate at Camp Pendleton, and wondered how he was going to get back to Houston to see his young bride and their infant son. My father had just completed his tour of duty in Korea as a Marine gunnery sergeant and now deeply desired to be home. And even though Uncle Sam had given him a free ride to basic training, they were not doing the same for his way home. At that moment a car pulled up. It was one of the men from his unit. The man called out, “Hey sarge, where are you headed?” My dad replied, “Houston.” “Need a lift?” was the response, “I’m driving all the way to Louisiana, and I would be happy to have you ride along.” My father expressed his appreciation, hopped in and away they went. Several days later my dad arrived unexpectedly at his in-laws, where my mom and older brother were living. He thanked his friend, knocked on the door, and in the warmth of the welcome he received he found hope, peace, and joy.

Let me ask this, this morning, do any of you need a lift? If you do, then you need to hitch a ride as together we walk in God’s love. Let me explain. In this world there are many kinds of love. There is motherly and fatherly love. There is brotherly and sisterly love. There is romantic love and passionate love. There is physical love and spiritual love. There is love of country and love of neighbor. There is sacrificial love and love of self. All these types of love have their place and time. Each of these types of love enriches our lives and the world. They make life worth living. What I want us to do today is add one more kind of love to our love lexicon, and that is lifting love. I want us to add lifting love because that is the most accurate way to describe the love of God. The scriptures regularly refer to the steadfast love of the Lord or to the love of God, but our tendency is to want to take one of many forms of love and associate that kind of love with God’s love. We may think of God’s affection for us, or God’s care and concern for us...all of which are present, but at its heart, God’s love is a lifting love. It is a love that finds us when we are down, broken, alienated, and alone and lifts us up so we can find hope, peace, and joy. We can see this in both of our stories this morning.

Hannah was down. As we discussed last week, she was childless while her sister wife had multiple children. And even though she was loved by her husband, she felt the pressure from society to meet the expectations that rested upon all women to bear male offspring, and she felt the derision from her sister wife. Again, to recap, Hannah promised God that if she bore a child she would dedicate her child to serving God in the Tabernacle. Hannah becomes pregnant, delivers, weans her child, and then gives him back to God. Those actions are then celebrated in the song we heard this morning; a song about Good’s having lifted her and every other person who is bent down and oppressed. Listen again. “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength...the Lord 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.” This is the love of God. This is lifting love that takes individuals who find themselves at the edge of defeat and raises their heads, changes their status, and offers them hope, peace, and joy.

We can find this same lifting love in Mary's song. This time though, the lifting is not simply for Mary, but it is for a nation...and by extension the world. Again, a recap. The Jewish people have been waiting more than four-hundred years for a messiah to arise who would free them from the oppression in which they had found themselves. During those four-hundred years the Jewish people had been dominated by the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. While the Jews had been able to worship at their rebuilt temple most of that time, the pressure to leave their God behind and adopt Greco-Roman ways was becoming almost intolerable. The nation was bowed down under Roman rule. So, each day Jewish men prayed for a messiah. Each day Jewish women prayed to be the mother of the chosen one. We can hear Mary's joy in having been selected for this task. We can also hear her speak of God's lifting love. "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly...He has filled the hungry with good things...He has helped his servant Israel, according to the promise he made to our ancestors..." Do you hear the lifting of a nation? This is what the love of God does. It lifts.

I want us to return to my father's story for a moment. In my father's story there were two people involved, my dad and his buddy. My father needed a lift, and his friend offered it. While we can see this as an analogy of God lifting us, I hope we will also see it as God using my dad's friend as a lifting agent...as the one who made God's lifting love real. For you see, that is what we are called to be and do. We are called to be those who allow God's love to lift us and we are called to be those who are God's agents of lifting others. And if you think this kind of lifting is hard...it isn't...so let me tell you a story about Anthony Ray Hinton. It was 1985 and Hinton was working the night shift in a factory that was locked so no one could get in. Unbeknownst to him, miles away, someone brutally murdered two store managers during robberies. A third manager was wounded and picked Hinton's face out of set of picture cards. Hinton was arrested, tried, and convicted, even though there were witnesses that he was in the locked factory all night. The only physical evidence was a gun found at his grandmother's house seemed to be the murder weapon...except later forensics ruled it out. Hinton was sentenced to death. Ultimately, he would spend 30 years on death row, most of it solitary confinement, in a 5x7 cell, only allowed out one hour a day. As he tells his story, for the first several years he was angry and refused to speak with anyone. If he needed to reply to a question, he would write the answers on a piece of paper. But then one night he heard the man in the next cell crying. Moved by memories of his grandmother's love, he asked what was wrong. The man replied that his mother had just died. Hinton replied, "Well now you have someone in heaven who can plead your case with God before you get there." Then Hinton told the man a joke. The man laughed...and Hinton had found his voice and calling. He would be a lifter of people. And so for the next 30 years, he was a lifter of inmates and guards. He was a force of God's love in that prison. In 2015, the United States Supreme Court unanimously overturned his conviction...and to this day, Hinton continues to be a lifter of people.

This, my friends, is what we are called to be, those who find our voice as God lifts us as did Hannah, Mary, and Anthony and then use our voices to lift others. Here then, is what I would like you to do, close your eyes and feel God's love, lifting you...taking your hand, lifting under your arms, taking from you the pain, the weight, the fear, the worry and lifting you into God's very presence, into the light of God. Then, as you are being lifted, think of someone who needs lifting...a friend, a stranger, a neighbor...and then find your voice and make a commitment to go and lift.