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 First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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The End of the World as We Know It...
 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Mark 13:1-8

Talib Kweli's 2002 anthem *Get By* starts with a wail – a singular cry, a cry that belongs to one woman and one woman only – Nina Simone. He loops Nina's 10 minute masterpiece, *Sinnerman*, throughout his song.

Nina Simone was called the high priestess of soul. She was the kind of musician who defied easy labels – a classical pianist, she drew on the work of Gershwin and Chopin and Beethoven and Bach – but she really played a kind of soulful folk or bluesy jazz, and was a powerful voice in the civil rights movement. In 1963, she sang her rebuke of the bombing of 16th street Baptist Church and the murder of the four girls there, and the assassination of Medgar Evers – “Alabama's gotten me so upset,” she sang, “...and everybody knows about Mississippi....” The song Kweli samples, *Sinnerman*, is an old spiritual – one that describes a man attempting to hide from justice on judgment day. Simone's singing comes from somewhere deep within – it's soulful. When she sings a spiritual like *Sinnerman*, she draws on the historical memory of her people, invoking centuries of faith – faith that sustained African Americans despite the persistent evil of slavery and Jim Crow.

With that one loop, Kweli is able to evoke a history of resistance. The wail brings to mind the fight for civil rights and Simone's own activism, and even more than that, the embodied historical memory of enslavement and the struggle for liberation. All of this connects to the story he tells in his song, of people doing whatever it takes just to get by in a system that keeps them poor and imprisoned.

All that in just one loop.

Music.

It's amazing, isn't it. It is evocative! Who already has REM stuck in their head just by reading the sermon title? Music can transport us, uplift us, give voice to our greatest hopes and open up our most powerful laments. Music can connect the experience of one community with another's across decades or even centuries.

And that is what happens with the song Susan read this morning. To remind you, Hannah was singing, rejoicing, giving praise to God for the birth of her son, Samuel. The birth seemed like a miracle because Hannah had been barren – and she longed for a child. She prayed so fervently for a child that the priest thought she was drunk. Prayed so long and so hard she even got to the phase of prayer where you strike a deal with God. Her deal was that if she could have a baby, she would dedicate him to serve God as a Nazirite priest. When the spark of life takes hold within her, and finally watches her belly swell

and bring forth a child – She sings a song of joyful praise – praising God, the Rock of all being, who saves the least and the last. Giving thanks to God who remembered her.

Hannah's song was probably not original to her.

It was most likely a song of praise known to the people of Israel. So in this joyful moment, she sang something she knew. It is significant that the author of Samuel names her, gives her a personality and purpose and puts these words into her mouth. Hannah was a nobody. She was a childless woman, a burden, and the high priest thought her a drunk. But God intervenes and makes her somebody. She becomes the mother of the kingmaker, Samuel. Samuel is the one called by God to anoint Saul and then David as rulers of Israel. Maybe that's why centuries later, when Mary rejoiced at the promise of the child she carried within her, she used the song of Hannah to sing her praises to God. Hannah, who described God's intervention into the world on her behalf, and celebrated the great reversals God can bring – who breaks the bows of the mighty and builds up the strength of the weak. Who sends the wealthy away hungry and fills the hungry with good things.

Looking around, and reading the news lately, it might be easy to doubt that these songs are true. The powerful seem quite comfortable on their thrones. The poor are still hungry, still rich are still full. What's more, California is on fire, with whole towns incinerated and more than a thousand people still missing. There's famine in Yemen caused by a war our tax dollars are funding. And there are troops stationed along our Southern border, men and women sweltering in tents, preparing to eat MRE's for Thanksgiving in the desert instead of turkey with their families.

Meanwhile, a mass of poor people is walking North, afraid for their lives, in search of asylum. Refugees from a gang war, and casualties of the global economy. And our country is preparing to treat them like an enemy, like criminals.

There will be wars, and rumors of wars. And earthquakes and famines and all manner of things. We still fear the world is falling apart – Mark's apocalyptic vision doesn't sound far off. "Do not be alarmed," Jesus told his disciples. I think he was trying to tell them that the world will change. We can count on it. Sin is real, and systemic evil is more entrenched than we can fathom. But God is faithful. God is at work in and through history to bring transformation, and new life. And we can see it if we pay attention. Like a sample from an ancient song, we can hear God's call if we know to listen for it. God made promises to Abraham and Isaac, to Hannah and Samuel, to Mary and Joseph – and we can count on God's presence and power and provision no matter what mess we make for ourselves here on earth.

As people of faith, we are analog people in a digital world. We read old books and light candles and sing songs. We have a long memory – remembering what God has done in the past, and gathering here in this place to remind each other when we start to forget, and shore up our faith in the future. We sing the hymns of our ancestors because the tune is embedded deep in our bones. And deep down we know – that if God is for us, who can

be against us? God, who raises the poor up from the dust, who lifts the needy from the ash heap – is our rock, and our redeemer. Of whom shall we be afraid?

In the video he made for our stewardship campaign, Bob Woolverton said something that stayed with me. He said his family has been in this church for four generations. And he gives to First Pres because he wants this place to be here for four generations more. God willing, that will be true. Old First will thrive and flourish far into the future. But God has no hands and no hearts but ours. Today we will dedicate our pledges to God and give thanks for the abundant generosity and ministry God has enabled. Now is the time to recommit ourselves to the mission and ministry of our church. It won't happen here without us. God is doing a new thing, the air is pregnant with possibility – and we are called to be midwives, helping bring God's promises to life.

In the year ahead, is there at least one thing you can commit to do to serve God in this place or in the world? In a minute, you'll bring forward your offerings, pledges, and the commitment cards found in your pews. They have a simple statement – in the year ahead, I commit to... and I challenge you to fill in the blank. Each one of us has something we can offer to God in this place. Maybe you teach, or want to help lead or participate in a small group. Maybe you can visit the sick or write visitors or care for our children. Maybe you are called to serve at First Light or with GBM or Faith in Action or Cahaba Valley Healthcare. Maybe you just want to see new plants in the courtyard or the water damage repaired so we can be proud to host outside groups in our building in the years ahead. Maybe you are called to worship, faithfully, and to be a welcoming and loving presence here. Whatever it is, write it down. Commit to it, recommitting yourself to be a faithful disciple in the year to come. The good news is that God is already at work, in us, in this place, and in our community – inviting us to join in, to share good news, to teach and to heal, to uplift the poor and support the weak, and to work for a more just world.