

Today begins the second week of Advent, the season of 4 weeks that prepare us to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. *I am writing this without knowing whether we will be able to gather in a sanctuary to celebrate this time or if we will be confined to our homes due to snowy weather. But either way, this is a time of preparation.*

Our first scripture was from I Samuel about Hannah. **(I Samuel 1:1-28)**. We will see a lot of similarities in the story we read earlier and the second story. In the story we read about Hannah and in the upcoming story we will read about Elizabeth, we encounter couples who are unable to have children.

I say couple but for both Hannah and Elizabeth the woman was the one that was blamed whenever a couple could not conceive. It was believed that God must be punishing the infertile couple for some reason.

I need to lay it on the table and say that I find it very difficult to read these 2 stories from the Bible and the other stories from the Bible of women who are barren. Hannah and Elizabeth belong in a biblical tradition that includes Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and the mother of Samson. All women that wanted children but were unable to have children.

But in all these stories the women are blessed by the end of the story with the birth of children. And that is where I have difficulty reading these stories. Because in all these stories, the pain and sense of abandonment that these women feel is solved at the end of the story by the safe delivery of children. In each story God blesses their faithfulness with the birth of children. And that is great.

But women and men can read these stories and have a theological understanding confirmed that if a woman who is barren simply prays hard enough and is righteous enough then she will eventually bear children. And that is why I have difficulty with these two stories.

I have difficulty with these two stories because we know that infertility and faith in God is not so clear cut. Many of us know all too well the pain and agony that come with infertility in our families or in couples that are close to us.

I've had women who don't have children tell me of the comments that are directed to them by friends who try to be encouraging but end up making comments that are harmful.

Comments like: Have you thought about adoption? Uhh, yea. Or, have you thought about treatments? Uhh, yea. Or, God must have a special plan for you to love other children. Or, maybe your relationship is not blessed by God because you can't biologically have children together.

Or other comments that people make to try to give themselves simple answers to a complex issue. And all these answers that people give to couples that can't have children for various reasons end up creating distress and loneliness in a relationship.

But stories of infertility are stories in the Bible. And as such, we will read them. But I hope that today we can see something different than a simple interpretation that childless women just need to have a little more faith. Or the belief that a woman must have a child to be complete and pleasing to God.

Today we are going to be reading about the birth of John the Baptist to his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. You may not have heard this story very often. It usually gets overlooked. During Advent we tell the story of the adult John the Baptist appearing from the wilderness to give witness to the coming of Jesus. But we hear very little about his birth.

We do get to hear in Advent and Christmas of the mother of John, Elizabeth, being a supporting character to Mary, the mother of Jesus. But not hearing about the birth of John is unfortunate because the story of Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah is an important story. It's an important Advent story.

Read Luke 1:1-25

There are several similarities in this story with other stories in the Old Testament. I mentioned the connection to Hannah in the Old Testament. In both stories we have distraught families who are faithful to God. In both stories the couple presents themselves to God in worship.

In both stories the couple offers up their prayers to God to deliver them. In both stories God hears their prayers. And in both stories the women give birth.

But in reading these 2 passages this week, I see something beyond the direct connection between barrenness and birth. Instead, I see a connection between being disgraced by the society and being blessed by God. God blesses those whom the society disgraces.

This week while working on this sermon I heard the story of Connie Moultroup. Since she was 5 years old, she has had a Christmas dream to meet her biological mother. Connie was adopted as an infant but her adoptive mother died when she was 5 years old.

Her adoptive father remarried but his new wife was very abusive to Connie. Connie dreamed of her biological mother taking her away from her terrible situation.

Connie Moultroup was recently given an Ancestry.com kit and she set out to try to find her biological mother. Connie discovered that her mother, Genevieve Purinton, gave birth to her in an Indiana hospital in 1949. But when her mother asked to see her new baby, she was told that the baby had died.

Nurses taking children from their birth mother and telling the mother that the child had died was not an uncommon practice at the time, however. Connie's mother was an unwed teenager. And numerous cases have been documented of unwed mothers having their babies removed from them in the hospital with the mothers being told that their children had died.

Connie used the Ancestry.com kit and set out to find her mother. Connie was connected to a blood relative who told her that her biological mother was still alive. So, Connie, now 69, went to Florida where she met her 88-year-old biological mother for the first time.

After meeting for the first time and hearing her mother's story, Connie says they hugged and cried, and cried, and cried. In that moment her mother's disgrace of being an unwed teenage mother was transformed into a blessing from God.

In the story of the birth of John to Elizabeth and Zechariah, the 25th verse sums up what I think this story is all about. Elizabeth says this: "This is what the Lord has done for me. The Lord looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

For Elizabeth, the removal of that societal disgrace meant the birth of a child. But for others of us, removal of that disgrace and a blessing from God may mean something else. For a heterosexual couple unable to have children, the removal of that disgrace and a blessing from God may mean support from a person or a group of people. The blessing from God may be a new direction in life that confirms for them that they are not abandoned by God, but that God is with them on that journey.

But there are others who face societal disgrace and are seeking a blessing from God. People like Maria who is a young adult I know who was raised in a Catholic home in South America by parents who love her deeply. She left her Spanish speaking home to continue her education in the United States. While living in the US she has come to understand that she is gay. She recently confessed this to her parents in a phone call back home.

Maria's parents have not handled this well and are quite confused. How could this happen? They wonder if they made a mistake in sacrificing so much to send their daughter to the US to study. Being an out gay person in a conservative Catholic South American country is seen as a disgrace.

But recently Maria's roommate has been in that South American country. Maria's parents invited the roommate to their home and they had lots and lots of questions. But her roommate has been reassuring the parents that this daughter is fine and that she is not a disgrace to the family but still their blessing from God.

There are many reasons why people are disgraced in our society. Maybe they used poor judgement and got in trouble. Maybe they have been judged for something that they have no control over. Maybe they have been misunderstood.

When we look at someone who is disgraced, or we acknowledge that we are a disgrace to someone else, we can remember the stories of Elizabeth, and Rebecca, and Rachel, and Hannah, and the mother of Samson. Women who faced societal disgrace that God chose to bless.

Disgrace is not the way that God looks upon us. God looks upon us with blessing.
AMEN.

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-<https://kdvr.com/2018/12/07/88-year-old-mother-reunites-with-daughter-she-thought-had-died-at-birth-69-years-ago/>

-Given: December 9, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)