

### **"Birth Notice"**

"My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God"

They may arrive in a blue or pink envelope and include a photograph, or as an email blast to hundreds of family and friends; but birth notices always announce the joyous arrival of a newborn baby. It is a time when parents invite people in their lives to rejoice with them as they welcome their child into the world. While such notices are always welcome, they are especially poignant when they announce a birth to a couple who have struggled for many years in having children. It may have been a successful birth after many miscarriages, or a birth to parents who had struggled for years to conceive, or an unexpected conception and birth to a couple who had been told that having a biological child was impossible. For such parents, announcing the birth of their new child is an extra-special reason for inviting everyone in their lives to rejoice with them.

The Bible is filled with accounts of women who were finding it difficult to conceive and bear children. When we are first introduced to Abraham and Sarah (known by their original names of Abram and Sarai) we are told, for reasons that are not explained, that *"Sarai was barren; she had no child"* (Genesis 11:30) and that *"it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women"* (Genesis 18:11). The wives of two of Abraham descendants – Rebekah the wife of Isaac and Rachel the wife of Jacob – also had difficulty in conception; Isaac *"prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren"* (Genesis 25:21), while Rachel also struggled with barrenness and demanded that Jacob give her children, to which he responded *"am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"* (Genesis 30:2). This theme of barrenness continues into the New Testament with Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah and cousin of Mary of Nazareth; like her ancestors in the Old Testament, *"they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years."* (Luke 1:7).

Yet in each of these situations, God intervenes so that these women give birth to children who are a joy to their families as well as the means through which God continues the covenant promise that the Lord makes through Abraham that *"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:3). When Sarah gives birth to a son named Isaac, which means "laughter," she rejoices because *"God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me ... Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."* (Genesis 21:6-7). When her descendant Elizabeth gives birth under very similar circumstances, *"her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her."* (Luke 1:58). The birth notice that goes forth from each of these families not only announces the arrival of the child they never thought would be born to them; it is also confirmation that *"nothing will be impossible with God,"* (Luke 1:37), that God will fulfill what God has promised no matter how improbably the circumstances may appear.

In today's first lesson, we meet another woman whose barrenness appears to make the possibility of childbirth impossible. Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, is so distressed by her inability to bear children (as well as by the taunting of her rival *"who used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb"* – 1 Samuel 1:6) that she *"wept and would not eat"* even though her husband loved her and lavished gifts on her. Hannah is so deeply distressed that she travels to the sanctuary at Shiloh, where she presents herself to the Lord and makes a solemn vow in the temple of the Lord:

- "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." – 1:11.

Nazirites were individuals who were set aside for unusual service to the Lord, sometimes in military service (Samson was a nazirite: *"So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a*

*nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.*" – Judges 13:7). Their commitment was marked by abstaining from wine and other strong drink and by never cutting their hair:

- "All their days as nazirites they shall eat nothing that is produced by the grape-vine, not even the seeds or the skins. All the days of their nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the LORD, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks of the head grow long." – Numbers 6:4-5.

Hannah's praying is noticed by Eli, the priest of Shiloh, who at first mistakenly believes that Hannah is drunk and asks her *"how long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."* (1:14). But Hannah defends herself, assuring Eli that *"I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD."* (1:15). When Eli realizes that he has been mistaken and that Hannah has been earnest in her prayers, *"speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time,"* the priest offers his benediction: *"Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."* (1:17).

When Hannah returned home, not only was she no longer sad but her life would take a sudden turn in a joyous direction: *"the LORD remembered her [and] in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son."* (1:19-20). Hannah responds by naming her son Samuel, a name related to the phrase *"I have asked him of the LORD."* As we might expect, she then announces the birth of this child, but in a way that we might not expect: instead of gathering friends and relatives to share in the joy of this unexpected child, Hannah bursts into song, which *"is offered to us as the only appropriate response to her experience of God's wondrous grace"* (Bruce C. Birch).

- "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." – 2:1-2.

Hannah's song is a psalm of praise and thanksgiving by a barren woman whose womb has been opened by the Lord, similar to other psalms of praise in the psalter (*"He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!"* – Psalm 113:9). Hannah's song also proclaims that her new future is also a new future opening up for Israel; Hannah sings *"not just as the mother of Samuel but as the mother of Israel."* The song suggests hope for the movement of Israel from a struggling confederation of tribes to an established nation. Israel's fortunes, like Hannah's, can be reversed.

- "Her song speaks of a whole catalog of reversals that are possible through the power of God: weakness made strength, the lowly made exalted, the hungry filled, the poor made rich, the barren given children ... Hannah's song celebrates and gives witness to this power of divine providence to create possibilities for the future that seem impossible through human and historical resources alone." – Birch.

Hannah's singing gives praise to God as the source of her deliverance; it also warns those who are inclined to pride or arrogance to beware lest they think they can control their own destiny apart from the Lord: *"Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed."* (2:3). Her song goes on to catalog the surprising reversals that are the result of God's power: *"The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn."* (2:4-5).

Because Hannah has experienced the power of God to reverse her own fortunes in her time of need, she sings this doxology in praise of God's transforming power as a reality to which all may turn in time of need. The God of these reversals is also the God who distinguishes between the faithful and the wicked: *"He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail."* (2:9). Human efforts to secure one's own destiny will not prevail apart from trust in what God is doing; it is God's power that

endures, for *“the LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to the king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”* (2:10). The power of God is linked to the anticipation of the gift of God’s king to Israel; it is Hannah’s son, the prophet Samuel, who will anoint Israel’s kings, Saul and David (1 Samuel 10:1, 16:13).

- “Hannah sings of a God whose transforming power can reverse those patterns that leave many powerless and without hope. She sings of a God who does not accept the world’s power arrangements. She sings of a God whose might is not wielded in a disinterested fashion. God is heavily invested in the welfare of the weak, the powerless the poor, the hungry, the dispossessed, and the barren.” – Birch.

Hannah’s birth notice invites us to not only celebrate the joy that God has brought into her life but the joy that is good news for everyone, because through her child God will continue to fulfill the covenant promise of restoration and reconciliation. Her song will be echoes centuries later by another woman whose circumstances are somewhat different from Hannah’s but who also recognizes that the birth of her child is a moment of joy for all humanity. Mary of Nazareth is not a woman who has struggled in conceiving a child; by all accounts, she would have no problem giving birth. She is a young woman engaged to Joseph and anticipating a life with her husband, raising a family in their hometown among family, friends, and neighbours.

- “Miriam of Nazareth, rooted and nurtured within the traditions of the old covenant, would have been taught how to keep her home kosher, how to wash pots correctly and avoid food forbidden in the Old Testament. She could patch worn garments and weave homespun wool. When Jesus says, ‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment’ (Mark 2:21), he must have been thinking of his mother mending his torn clothes in their humble home in Nazareth.” – Jenny Robertson, *Mary of Nazareth*.

But Mary’s hopes and dreams are thrown into disarray when the angel Gabriel suddenly appears and said *“Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.”* (Luke 1:28). While Mary is *“much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be”* (1:29), the angel announces that she has been chosen to be the mother of the child who will be the ultimate fulfillment of what God had promised to her ancestors, covenant promises that endured from generation to generation through faithful persons like Hannah:

- “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” – 1:31-33.

When Mary asks, *“how can this be, since I am a virgin,”* Gabriel explains that her child will be unlike any child bore before or since; for *“the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”* (1:34-35). The angel then points to Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, the barren woman who is in *“the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”* (1:36-37). Mary’s entire future is now in jeopardy; she risks a scandal when it is discovered that she is carrying a child that is not her fiancé’s, which would destroy her life and all of her dreams for her future. But in her response, Mary chooses to trust in God as the one who is always faithful in fulfilling all that God has promised to her and to her people throughout the generations: *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”* (1:38).

- “Luke solves the tension between a family constituted by discipleship and the natural family of Jesus by birth. He does this in the account of the annunciation where Mary hears the word of God from an angel and says, ‘Be it done unto me according to your word.’ (Luke 1:38). Thus if a disciple is one who hears the word of God and does it, Mary becomes the first Christian disciple because she is the first one to hear the word of God and to consent wholeheartedly that it be done.” – Raymond Brown.

In the presence of another expectant mother, her cousin Elizabeth, who greets her with the Spirit-inspired benediction *“blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”* (1:42), Mary joins Hannah in

announcing the birth of her child as good news not only for herself but for all humanity, the fulfillment of God's covenant promises *"he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."* (1:55).

- "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call be blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." – Luke 1:47-53.

The *Magnificat* is a birth notice from a mother who rejoices in the birth of her child and invites others to share in this good news of the birth of *Emmanuel* – *"God is with us."* It is the notice that the time of waiting has ended, that in the coming birth of her son in Bethlehem *"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."* It is a notice of the coming of *"good news of great joy to all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."* (2:10-11).

- "Miriam of Nazareth voices the longings of the despised and downcast among her people. Her song looks forward to the heart of the gospel, the 'Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). She empowers the humblest believer to stand straight and affirm our dignity as a child of the Father. Like Hannah, her thoughts go out from her personal joy to the poor of Israel. She prophesies a revolution, not of force but of love: the hungry will be fed while the rich go away empty; the mighty shall be put down, the humble lifted high... Miriam, the young unmarried girl in Nazareth, is called into the heart of the mystery. And she rejoices in the Lord." – Robertson.

The hope-filled future that is proclaimed in the birth notices sung by Hannah and Mary is fulfilled through Mary's son, whose ministry begins with his declaration that *the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* (Mark 1:14-15). But as Jesus warns his followers in today's Gospel lesson, the fulfillment will not come without difficulty, comparing it to a reality endured by many mothers such as Hannah and Mary: *"This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."* (13:8). While the birth of a child often comes with joy and great expectations, there is also anxiety, danger, and great pain. Jesus uses "birth pangs" (*odin*) to describe to his disciples how they are to conduct themselves in the midst of turmoil and persecution, recognizing that the pain and suffering they will experience is a part of the process of the birth of the new creation that will come through Jesus' own "birth pangs," his suffering and death on the Cross and his resurrection on Easter morning. The birth process may be painful, but the God whose praises are sung by faithful women like Hannah and Mary calls us to *"hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."* (Hebrews 10:23).

- "We are called to live in joy and confidence. Joy in the knowledge that God has revealed God's grace, mercy and goodness to us and all the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Knowing God's love in Christ, that is, we are called joyfully to share that love with others. And confidence from trusting the promise that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us, restoring the world to its intended glory." – David Lose.

A birth notice invites us to join new parents in celebrating the birth of their child. In the birth notices of Hannah, Mary, and all the faithful women who God called to fulfill God's promises, we have the birth notice which is good news for us in this coming season and in all seasons: *"to you is born ... a Savior, which is the Messiah, the Lord."* Amen.