

Resurrptions

1 Samuel 1:1-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Each week, I listen to a handful of preaching podcasts that discuss the texts of the week and offer ideas for sermons.

They all said the same thing this week: *Don't* preach a Mother's Day sermon.

Their reasons were solid. Preaching should always be done from Scripture, from the story of Jesus and the church (Advent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost..).

Sermons and worship themes should not be dictated by Hallmark holidays.

There were practical and pastoral considerations for this advice that went beyond theological concerns.

We know that while Mother's Day is time of celebration for many, it can also be a source of pain for others.

Those who have lost their mothers, for example. Or mothers who have lost children.

Or those who wish they could be mothers but are not. Or those who have no desire to be mothers.

Or those who struggle with infertility.

Or those who have strained relationships with their mothers. Or those who feel like they have failed or *are* failing as mothers.

There are all kinds of reasons for why this day might be difficult for some.

So, from the theological to the pastoral, there are many good reasons *not* to preach Mother's Day sermons. I agree with most of these reasons.

But today I'm going to set all of these good reasons aside and preach a Mother's Day sermon. Sort of.

My reasons for this are probably obvious. We have celebrated this morning with Paul and Joani and Cayden on the gift of Adeline.

Every child and family and story is special, of course, but those of us who are part of this community know that Adeline was a very unexpected and joyful surprise that emerged out of a long season of waiting and praying and hoping and having hopes dashed and daring to hope again.

This theme of a promised child who arrives after long years of waiting is a prominent one throughout the biblical narrative.

God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, but he and Sarah are well into their tenth decade and still waiting.

They had no doubt given up on the possibility of a child. Both had laughed out loud when God renewed his promise that they would have a child.

But then... Isaac.

Isaac grew up and married Rebekah who was also described as "childless." Isaac prayed to the Lord on her behalf and then... Jacob and Esau.

Jacob grew up and married Leah (unintentionally) and then Rachel (intentionally).

(I don't have time to tell the whole story, but you can find it in Genesis 29.)

Rachel, too, is unable to conceive. Eventually, after a long story involving Jacob having children through Leah and the servant girls, it says "the Lord remembered Rachel."

And then... Joseph.

The theme of God remembering the childless woman plays a prominent role in the stories of the patriarchs of Israel and the story of the birth of a nation.

We see it in the New Testament, too. In the gospel of Luke, John the Baptist, the forerunner for Jesus, was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah in their old age.

In each case, there was incredulity, probably worn out dreams, perhaps even despair and

resignation.

And then the promised child arrives.

Today's scripture tells the story of Hannah and her son Samuel.

Again, we have a man, Elkanah, who has two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

Peninnah would even mock Hannah, which points to the shame and disgrace attached to childlessness at the time (a burden unfairly borne by women).

Elkanah, in a luminous moment of male sensitivity and understanding, says, "It's ok, you still have me. I'm worth at least ten sons, right?" I'm no expert on these matters, but I'm thinking silence might have been the better option there.

Hannah weeps and cries out to the Lord. She makes a vow that if God will grant her a son, she will give him back to the Lord.

And then... Samuel.

The Lord remembers Hannah.

Samuel becomes this massive figure in the history of Israel, the hinge between the time of the judges and the monarchy beginning with Saul, David and Solomon.

So, what do we take from this story?

What does this theme of the childless woman who is remembered by God have to say to us on this day when we celebrate mothers?

Well, the first thing it says to us is that there is always hope.

I obviously couldn't help but read the story of Hannah and Samuel (and the others) alongside my observation of Paul and Joani's story over the past half-decade or so.

Paul and Joani aren't approaching a hundred, but I know that they endured some long years and dark moments—wondering, praying, hoping, maybe even despairing.

And then... Adeline.

A child is always an incredible gift, but I suspect the experience is intensified when the hope of a

child had seemed to be dimming or was even extinguished.

In the stories I shared from Scripture, in the story of Paul and Joani and others like them, the arrival of a child is a powerful affirmation of faith, hope, and love.

God has remembered us! God has looked with favour upon us! There is hope for our future!

We can and we *must* celebrate these stories, on Mother's Day, on *any* day.

And yet...

(You knew this was coming, right?)

I know what some of you are thinking even on a day of celebration like this.

Ok, but what about all the women whose wombs remained closed? How many "barren" women in ancient times never had an Isaac, a Jacob, a Samuel? How many women's stories were never recorded and simply faded sadly away.

How many women long to have children today and it never happens? How many women, like Hannah, weep and pray and cry out to heaven and hear nothing but silence? Is their faith weak? Does God forget rather than remember them?

The stories of Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah and Elizabeth are inspiring, but they remain the exception, not the rule. It is unwise to read them as templates for all women at all times.

Too often, people of faith take stories of miraculous births or deliverance from suffering or Damascus road conversion experiences as evidence that if you have enough faith and patience, God will bless you in identical ways.

Suffering and sickness and childlessness and doubt then become evidence of weak faith. Guilt is piled upon pain.

We must never do this.

This is not how God works. God is not a vending machine or an equation where you enter in the right variable and out comes the right answer every time.

Life and faith and God are more complicated than that.

So, is there a way that we can both celebrate miracles like Hannah and Samuel and Paul and Joani

and Adeline, and at the same time acknowledge the complicated nature of reality for many women, many families, and the life of faith more broadly?

I think there is.

For the second consecutive sermon, I have a three-point conclusion! Maybe my brain is starting to be rewired to think in terms of bullet points (I sure hope not!).

1. We celebrate resurrptions

You might have puzzled over the sermon title this morning. What on earth is a “resurrption?” Is that something produced by indigestion? Is it even a word?!

Well, no, it’s not a real word. I made it up on Thursday morning by forcing together two actual words: “resurrection” and “interruption.”

The first resurrection was itself an interruption of business as usual. Dead people tend to stay dead. And they did. Until Jesus was raised from the dead and interrupted business as usual.

Paul was resurrpted on the road to Damascus—the resurrected Christ interrupted his plans for death and religious purity and set him on the path of life.

Peter was resurrpted in a vision where he learned that he must no longer call Gentiles unclean because they were created and loved by God and welcomed into God’s future. The examples could go on.

I see stories like Hannah and Samuel’s and Paul and Joani’s as resurrptions—surprise interruptions of the way things tend to go with life, with hope, with promise!

A resurrption is any time where life interrupts death, hope interrupts sorrow, love interrupts fear and selfishness and pride.

These are foretastes of eternity. And we celebrate them with joy and thanksgiving!

2. We look for unexpected answers

Naomi and I have some experience here. We, too, were childless. We, too, prayed for a child. We had clear ideas of how we wanted the story to turn out.

But God answered our prayer in a different way. And now those two answers to prayer are almost eighteen years old!

Sometimes God gives us an answer to prayer we never could have imagined. Sometimes God

sends the story in a completely different direction that contains completely unanticipated blessings.

Jesus himself is an unexpected answer to the longing of a people and of all creation.

A suffering servant instead of a conquering king.

A prince of peace instead of a military hero.

A reconciling embrace of all humanity instead of the rescue of one nation.

A love that conquered fear and a life that swallowed up death.

A foolishness that is wiser than any human wisdom.

Nobody saw any of this coming. But God did. God does this kind of thing.

3. We trust God in barren seasons

This is perhaps the hardest lesson. Barren seasons come. Sometimes they don't leave.

Sometimes they must be endured until the new creation when all is healed, and all is made new. We must accept this.

The life of faith is not a recipe for getting what we want or having a comfortable life uninterrupted by sorrow and struggle. There are people in this room who know this in a deep and personal and painful way.

It does, however, offer a way of living and loving and never giving up hope in the midst of trial.

It offers us a model of Someone who has showed us how to do this and who has suffered on our behalf, and whose Spirit promises strength and hope even during barren times.

I think one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture that gives voice to this comes from the prophet Habakkuk. Writing to a people starved for hope, he offers these words:

*Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,*

yet I will rejoice in the Lord,

I will be joyful in God my Savior. — Habakkuk 3:17-18

So, my prayer is that God would enlarge our faith, our joy, our hope and our love to incorporate the totality of human experience and the ways in which God forms us along the way.

May God help us to be people who are always on the lookout for resurreptions—glorious interruptions of life, like unexpected babies—and eager to celebrate these both for what they are and for what they point to.

May God help us to be prepared for surprises along the way—for the unexpected ways in which God grows faith, hope, and love in our lives.

And may God help us to rejoice in the Lord, who is our strength even in barren times, when the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine.

Amen.

