

Sermon
2 December 2018
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Reading: Judges 13:2-14, 24

Holy Communion

Today is the 1st Sunday in Advent. And all through Advent this year, we are going to take a look at *Important Birth Stories* in the Bible.

The birth story we will be talking about today, is one from the Old Testament – the announcement of the birth of Samson. I think it's safe to say that although most of us know the *story* of Samson quite well, his *birth story* is not that well known.

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Please allow me to divert a little here. My boys are *fascinated* with their birth stories... Do you know your own birth story?

I don't know mine – the only story I can remember my mum telling me about the time when I was a new baby, was that the cat didn't like me one bit – because before I arrived, she was the baby in the house! My mum and dad's cat was called "Ostrich" – don't ask me why! And apparently, every time Ostrich came into my bedroom, my dad would say: "OUT Ostrich!" So guess what my first 3 words were? "Mama, Dada, out!"

And then, the day my mum came home from the hospital with my baby brother in her arms, I was sitting in my high chair eating my dinner. I apparently gave him one look and then threw him a pea at him right between the eyes! Now *the cat* wasn't the only jealous one in the house anymore!

I might not know exactly what happened the day I came into the world, but I do know that it was a very special day to my mum and dad.

But differently from me, some people have hair-raising stories to tell! A good friend of mine gave birth in the car on the way to the hospital! And I even know about somebody who's head got stuck in the bedframe while she was giving birth and the fire brigade had to come cut her loose!

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Samson's birth story might have been less traumatic than that, but it surely was out of this world!

His mum thought that she couldn't have any children. And in a culture where the only thing that gave women some status in society was giving birth to a son, that was really hard to live with.

But then an angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her that she was going to have a son.

And not just any son – a special son, who had to be dedicated to God and who would free his whole nation from the grip the Philistines had on them.

This story is replicated quite a few times in the Bible: A wife is unable to conceive, then she gets an angelic visitor and her child has to be set aside for the Lord.

We see this in the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah in the Old Testament; and also in the story of Elizabeth in the New Testament. The people of God are oppressed, and the child's birth brings the possibility of salvation.

They had a special name for somebody who was set apart like that in Old Testament times – they were called Nazarites.

A Nazarite had to be different and look different from everybody else, so they would be easily recognisable. They were not allowed to drink wine or eat unclean food, so that they could be healthy and strong; and they were not allowed to cut their hair.

So straight away Samson's mum had to stop drinking wine, and she would never be allowed to cut his hair.

What are the 2 most well-known facts about Samson? That he was strong and that he had long hair. And this is because he was a Nazarite.

So... Dreaming about this amazing baby she was going to give birth to... I wonder how his mum imagined him? What she thought he would be like?

A really strong baby? And an even stronger toddler?

With long hair? Hair that would most certainly get noticed by others?

No matter what she might have imagined, she *listened* to the angel. She *believed* him, although it must have been really hard to understand and take it all in.

Her husband, on the other hand, needed a little convincing that she wasn't making all this up. He really wanted to hear it with his own ears. But it was a big thing, so God understood Manoah's uncertainty, and He sent the angel again at Manoah's request.

But do you know what my favourite part of this story is? When Manoah meets the angel, he says: "*When* your words are fulfilled..." He doesn't say: "*If* your words are fulfilled...", but "*when* your words are fulfilled, how should we bring up this baby?"

So although they had no guarantee that what this angel was saying would actually happen, or whether he really was an angel at all – the both believed that he was telling them the truth. And they were obedient to him.

Manoah's wife does what she has been told, and at the end of our reading Samson is born. We read that *he grew up and the Lord blessed him*.

All through his life God was with Samson. Even from before he was born, until the day he died.

This doesn't mean that Samson was perfect – we all know that he made a few bad choices in his life too, of which the worst one probably was allowing Delilah to cut off his relationship with God with the same scissors she cut off his long hair.

But the moment Samson realised what he did, and he turned back to God, God was there, ready to forgive and help him again.

And just like that God is with all of us too. Even from before we are born, and he stays with us until the day we die.

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You know what I find really remarkable about Samson's mum? The fact that she was just an ordinary woman. She wasn't someone important or particularly special, and we know this, because her name is never mentioned.

Other women in the same shoes all through the Bible are known by name, but Samson's mum is just "Samson's mum", or "Manoah's wife". It was a literary technique in those days to only name the important people in a story.

So here I think God is saying something important – that even ordinary, unimportant people, are important in his eyes. God wants to use all of us in one way or another.

The world might not remember this woman's *name*, but what she *did*, and *how* she did it, *her nature*, will never be forgotten.

She was an instrument in the hands of God, and she gave birth to and brought up a son according to God's own heart.

Samson changed the history of Israel, literally with his own 2 hands. Was it because he was strong, and his hair was long? No – it was because God was with him. And all the time he really believed it – he could do *anything* he put his mind to, even things that others would deem impossible, like killing a lion with your bare hands.

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All of us belong to God too. God doesn't expect us to never cut our hair and not eat or drink certain things today.

But that doesn't mean that he doesn't want us to stand out, to look different from the rest of the world.

He wants it to be just as clear to those around us that we belong to him, as it would have been to people in Old Testament times if they saw Samson.

The difference is just that we should show this to people not through what we look like, but through *who we are*, through *what we do*. Like Samson's mum.

Our *nature* should make people realise straight away that we belong to God.

God loves us so much. He planned our births, and he planned our salvation through his son Jesus – something we are shortly going to celebrate around the Communion Table.

So let's get up from around this table this morning and go live like people who *know* that we belong to God.

Today people won't see the special relationship we have with God in our *hair*, but in our *hearts*.

Let's show the world our hearts, so that others can feel the love we have to share; and that those who are trying to stand in God's way, the "lions" of this world, will tremble in our presence...

Whatever your birth-story is, and no matter how much or how little you know about it; one thing is for sure, and that is that it was planned by God. Your life started because God wants you here. Choose carefully what you make of the rest of your story...

Amen