

"TWO WOMEN OF GREAT FAITH"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

There's a book entitled, Barren Couples and Broken Hearts, that's all about married couples who desperately want to have children, but, for one reason or another, are unable. To me, it's one of life's ironies. Some couples have unexpected and even unwanted pregnancies while other couples who are totally unfit to be parents have little or no trouble having a child. We all know couples with so much love to give but who are denied the opportunity.

Children, of course, are a challenge. The other day I happened to read about a family who lived on the 42nd floor of a highrise apartment building on the Chicago lakefront. Each morning the two year old son kissed his father good-bye as his father stepped into the elevator, which was located just outside the door of their apartment. Each night the boy wait to jump into his father's arms as he stepped back off the same elevator.

It was only later on, after the boy had learned to express himself clearly, that the family learned that for many months the little boy had though his dad spent his entire day, every day, on that elevator. To be sure, life is quite interesting from the perspective of a child.

DEVELOPMENT

Not everyone in our society wants to be a parent. And that's okay. No one should ever be made to feel unworthy because they make this choice. But there are some couples who want desperately to have children. Often these are some of the best people in the world. They are able both financially and emotionally to be the very best of parents, but nature does not always cooperate. And so, some will choose adoption. Others will choose to focus on each other and accept their childless state.

And this is where Elizabeth and Zechariah fit in this category. They were a devoted couple....devoted to God and devoted to one another. They had given up long ago on having a child. They had reached the age where such a thing was unrealistic. And they had learned to accept it and cope with it. God knew best, so they believed. Then one day the most extraordinary thing happened. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and announced that he and his Elizabeth would bear a son. This in itself was a tremendous shock, but the angel said something even more extraordinary. Their child was to be the long-awaited messenger who would announce the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah was struck speechless. In his old age he was to father a son who would be the Lord's messenger. Can you imagine how difficult it was for Zechariah to communicate all of this to Elizabeth, especially since he still could not speak? She was to become a momther - a very mature woman. They would have a son and he would grow up to be a very special man. That night they surely clung to one another in joy and in some measure of disbelief.

Elizabeth hid herself away when she discovered that she was "with child". Perhaps she was slightly embarrassed. Certainly she was in no hurry to draw attention to her condition. All her friends were grandmothers and she was preparing to have her first child.

It was all too much!

Elizabeth did not know that this same angel who appeared to her had also appeared to a relative of hers - a much younger woman betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. Elizabeth made that discovery when one day Mary appeared at her door. And Luke tells us something very special about that encounter. He says,

"The babe leaped in Elizabeth's womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed to Mary, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb....'"

(Luke 1: 41, 42)

Elizabeth announced the coming of Christ. What a beautiful story about some very beautiful people.

THEY BOTH FELT JOY AT THIS NEWS

Perhaps we should note, first of all, the joy that these two women felt at the news of their pregnancy. One was as yet unwed, the other in her mature years. Neither would have chosen the timing but both were thrilled at the event. Wouldn't it be great if all children could be greeted with such enthusiasm? But unfortunately we know better. That is not always the case!

One of the great scandals of our society is the prevalence of child abuse. Last year alone over 2.7 million cases were reported. One child, I have read, dies every 4 hours from abuse. The cost to our society is staggering. Two of every three prisoners convicted of first-degree murder report childhoods of physical abuse. Eighty percent of all prostitutes report histories of sexual abuse.

Friend, if you are the product of a loving and a happy home, give God some thanks every day of your life. You may have already received the richest blessing life can bestow. And if you have children of your own, make these years count for something in that life!

Sam Levenson tells a wonderful story about the birth of his first child. The first night home the baby would not stop crying. His wife frantically flipped through the pages of Dr. Spock to find out why babies cry and what to do about it. Since Spock's book is rather long, the baby cried a long time. Grandma was in the house, but since she had not read the books on childrearing, she was not consulted. The baby continued to cry. Finally, grandma could be silent no longer,

"Put down the book" she said, "And pick up the baby."

Good advice. Put down the book and pick up the baby. Spend time with your children, particularly at Christmastime. We have the mistaken notion that good parents give their children lots of things. Wrong.

In a survey done of fifteen thousand schoolchildren the question was asked, "What do you think makes a happy family?" When the kids answered, they didn't list a big house, or fancy cars, or a new video game as the source of happiness. The most frequently given answer was "Doing things together". Notice the joy with which these women greeted the news of their pregnancy.

"Doing things together". We need to remember that...and practice that!

FAITH WAS IMPORTANT

Noticed, in the second place, how important their faith was to them. Elizabeth and Mary both were selected to give birth to these very special babies because of their faith in God. They did not have affluent homes or great educational advantages. All they had was simple faith. And that's terribly important. Happy families don't just happen. They are part of a package.

I've heard young people complain that their parents expect too much of them. They speak of having too many rules and regulations. Maybe your home had them. Perhaps your parents were a bit old fashioned, a little behind the times. Let me clue you in. It is these same characteristics that make you so fortunate. If they were any other way, they wouldn't put your happiness before their own and they wouldn't make sacrifices in your behalf, and they wouldn't have surrounded you with love ever since you first came into the world. Because they are people of strong values, you can rest assured that they will always be there for you regardless of what may come. It's all part of a package. It has to do with a commitment that they have made - to God, to one another, and to you. The family that prays together generally does stay together, as true as that may sound to some of you.

Faith was important to Elizabeth and to Mary. They trusted God and that made a difference.

THEIR FAITH DID NOT PROTECT THEM FROM PAIN

Noticed, however, that the faith of Elizabeth and of Mary did not protect them from pain. The story of these two "mothers-to-be" does not have a happy ending. Both sons met tragic deaths. Elizabeth's son was executed by decapitation. Mary's son died on a cross....between two thieves. Both sons were still young men when they died. Can you imagine the heartache of both mothers? As an old Yiddish proverb says,

"Little children disturb your sleep, big ones,
your life!"

To have a child implies a big risk. It is the risk of loss. Some of us know about that loss. Some of you have lost children. For some, it may have happened in infancy. For others, after the child has reached adulthood. But regardless of when it happens, it brings indescribable pain. At such times all you can do is to believe in the God who loves you and whose care is eternal.

Some of you know Mary's pain and the pain Elizabeth experienced. It may not be the loss of a child, but the loss of a parent or a brother or a sister or a friend that saddens you each year. Perhaps this Christmas can be for you a time of deep healing.

A woman, pregnant with her first child late in life, was the first person in the New Testament to announce the coming of Christ. She and her kinswoman, Mary, looked forward with eagerness to the birth of their children. Would that every birth could be anticipated like that. Elizabeth and Mary were women of great faith. Faith is so important to family life.

There would come a time when both Elizabeth and Mary would have to entrust their sons to God. They knew their children were a gift from God. Regardless of what followed, they knew their children were always in God's care. That was their greatest hope and it is your hope and mine, too, with regard to everyone we love. This Christmas let us affirm our faith in the God of Elizabeth and Mary and in their two sons who changed our world.