

“Marked For Life”

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I Samuel 2:18-21 + Luke 2:41-52 = Baptism and Parenting

Exactly 21 years ago this Sunday, I performed a triple baptism: the Batchelor triplets, Bryanna, Lyndsey and Myriah. They were special. Better than special, they were positively miraculous. Their loving parents, David and Audrey, had tried for years to conceive without success by the usual means. Wrestling with infertility, they had turned to modern medical means.



Members of the congregation I served in Dallas, Audrey confided in me that though she and David had some means, nevertheless the expenses were so great that they had only one shot at this. They put all their hopes and desires on one roll of the dice, and prayed to God that it would succeed.

God heard them and blessed them with triplet girls. As always happens with multiples, they came prematurely and needed all kinds of care for some months before even being released to go home.

With their baptism on the last Sunday of 1997, it was truly a time of lifting thanksgiving and joy to God for the blessing of children. Despite there being nothing unusual now about success in infertility treatments, I still heard strong echoes of Biblical stories in Audrey’s and David’s testimony: those girls were marked, marked for life.

The Bible is full of miraculous births.

Numerous fertility miracles to infertile parents: Abraham and Sarah were well past childbearing when Isaac was born ~ the one, the only child through whom the covenant promise is transmitted down to us. Elizabeth and Zachariah also birthed John only after divine intervention. Don’t forget Mary and Joseph ~ where God birthed a child outside the usual means.





Today we have the story of Samuel, likewise an infertile couple. You know the story: Hannah prayed to God again and again, entreating God to bless them with a child. She made a promise to God, if she should have children that the first would be dedicated to God's service.

Hannah kept her promise after the miraculous birth of Samuel. At the earliest age possible, barely weaned, Samuel was placed in God's service, apprenticed to the priest Eli in the sanctuary at Shiloh and that's just the beginning of the story.

The faith of Eli, Hannah and Elkanah imprinted Samuel, he was marked for life. He became a great prophet in Israel, if not the greatest prophet, a judge and a leader. Samuel was the one chosen by God to consecrate the first kings of Israel: Saul and David.

Jesus too was marked, shown first in his miraculous birth ~ marked for life from faith and faithful living: the faith of his parents and grandparents and great grandparents going back even further than Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. All that faith and faithfulness marked Jesus, formed him and filled him with wisdom way beyond his years. Such was the wisdom he displayed on the occasion of being left in Jerusalem after the Passover in his twelfth year.

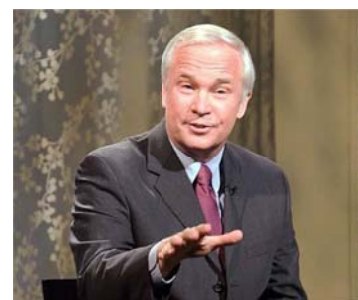


Talk about poor parenting being redeemed: All because of the weight of the faith coming down through the ages as his inheritance and Jesus being positively touched by it.

We think of all this infertility talk and miraculous birth stuff as more than a little quaint and outdated ~ for Bible times only and even then a little suspect. Certainly all superseded by medical technology. Yet, there still is room for God in the frame even today.

Will Willimon, preacher, professor, and retired Methodist Bishop tells this story from his decades as Dean of Duke University's Chapel:

One of his students wrote that during his youth: "I was the teenager from hell." He made his parents lives



utterly miserable. Totally irresponsible he flunked out of college and he was forced to work for several years. During that time he met and married a woman. They began attending a little church. Gradually, he came to the surprising notion that God was calling him to the Christian ministry. So he went back to college.

His greatest dread was telling his parents about this unexpected turn after all they had been through with him. Yet he steeled up his courage and met with them to tell them the story of how despite his life having been a tortured series of mistakes and irresponsibility, how he now believed that God actually wanted him to become a pastor.

His mother burst into tears. "I am so ashamed! I can't believe this has happened!"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I cannot believe this is happening," she repeated.

"Didn't I tell you before you were born I had had a couple of miscarriages? I didn't think we would ever have a child. So I promised God that if he would let me have a baby that I could bring to term, if it were a boy, I would name him Samuel and dedicate him to God, just like Hannah did back in the Old Testament."

"Why didn't you ever tell me that?" he asked. "You could have saved me a whole lot of trouble if you would have told me about this."

"We're Methodists. How was I to know something like this would work? I'm not even sure if we believe in this kind of thing. How was I to know that it would work?"¹



Goes for Presbyterians as well. How would we know we are capable of marking ourselves or our children or anyone else for that matter ~ marking them for life? Who knew?

Given our pessimistic view of our capabilities, we think that ultimately we have little real influence or power. Yet in reality we do have considerable real influence we tend to overlook. Not high value in our own minds, yet we can mark those around us for good or ill, for blessing or curse, to mark for life or death. In Baptism we

celebrate that influence, that albeit small power we do have, however we may want to ignore it.

Do you know the difference between a fairytale and a Texas tale? A fairytale begins “Once upon a time.” A Texas tale begins “You’re not gonna believe this!!”



Our texts today are emphatically not “once upon a time” fairy tales, but they are “you’re not gonna believe this” stories ~ about Mary, Joseph and Jesus; about Hannah, Elkanah and Samuel; about Elizabeth and Zachariah and John ~ all miraculous births, all critical persons for critical times, and all marked for

life. All are God’s gifts to us to lead us to joy and peace and salvation and shalom ~ peace that is both inner peace and peace for all on earth.

And no birth is more critical, nor more grace-filled, nor more peace-making than the birth of Jesus. We must ask ourselves as this critical season: Am I marked for life or death? For good or ill? For blessing or curse?



We too can be marked through the miraculous, the marvelous, the wholly unexpected birth of Jesus. May we for now and forever be marked, be marked for life not death; marked for life long service with whole hearted commitment and full-formed happiness.

May the mark of life flourish for eternity in each of us.

¹ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 31.4, pp. 54-55 for 28 December 2003