

God & Mothers

In commemoration of Mother's Day, we spend this week reflecting on the role of mothers in the life and teaching of Jesus, particularly in the Gospel of Luke. While Luke's primary intent in mentioning mothers is generally to teach about God, not to reflect on motherhood, these passages also legitimately prompt reflection on the latter, even if secondarily.

Day 1: Luke 1:5-25 When wanted children do not come

Mother's Day is meant to be a joyful time when we each celebrate and honor mothers for what they do for us. Yet the same occasion can be a painful time for those who long to be a mother, but who through some happenstance or misfortune are not. This is not just a modern issue. In fact, it was an even more urgent issue in Jesus' time, when culture located a woman's identity and function in her role in producing an heir. So we see Elizabeth here describe her infertility as a 'disgrace' and her conception late in life as a gift of divine favor (1:25). At the same time, Luke is careful to note that her preceding infertility was not divine punishment: "Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly" (1:6).

Of course, this passage is not *primarily* about the disappointment of infertility or about the blessings of conception. It is primarily about God's provision of a means of salvation through the birth of a Savior, and about John the Baptist's role in that (1:14-17). The birth of a child to an infertile couple reinforces the specialness of the work of God now occurring: the nation of Israel began with the birth of the patriarch Isaac to the infertile Abraham and Sarah; the monarchy of Israel began with the birth of the prophet Samuel to the infertile Elkanah and Hannah. God is again moving in a dramatic way, sending the Messiah. To underscore the specialness of this work of God, he once again enables the aged and infertile to conceive.

So while the *primary* focus of the narrative is not on Elizabeth's infertility, it is still an important element in the story. And not just her infertility, but also her sorrow over it. Of course, this text does not serve as precedent, promising every infertile couple that God will eventually enable them to conceive, provided they are "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." Common sense and life experience tell us that faithful Christians sometimes never conceive no matter how much they want children. But the text does indicate the God notices and cares about such disappointments, that he sometimes

answers such prayers, and especially that it is possible to serve God and celebrate his goodness even in the face of infertility.

Day 2: Luke 1:26-38 When unwanted children do come

Luke chooses an extraordinary way to introduce his Gospel; extraordinary, but appropriate, given that God chose an extraordinary way to introduce his Son. First, a barren couple longs for a child they cannot conceive, then an unmarried couple must come to grip with having a child they have not conceived. Luke conjoins the two narratives not only by placing them in proximity, but also by parallel development: (1) parents introduced, (2) obstacle to childbearing, (3) encounter with the angel Gabriel, (4) response to the angel, (5) “do not be afraid,” (6) promise of a son, (7) objection, and (8) provision of a sign. Luke also ties the two accounts together with common vocabulary: ‘troubled’, ‘the angel said’, ‘Do not be afraid’, ‘you will bear a son’, ‘you will name him’, ‘he will be great’, ‘said to the angel’, etc.

Again, the *primary* purpose of this account lies in salvation history: Jesus is the special child predicted in Isaiah 7:14, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” This son “will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32-33). At the same time, in the course of making this primary point, Luke affirms God’s sovereignty even over something as startling – or mundane – as unexpected pregnancy.

Mary’s pregnancy was both a biological impossibility and a social shame; nowadays unplanned pregnancy is generally just a pragmatic inconvenience. Still, a child brings considerable responsibility, and enormous lifestyle changes, so sometimes the pragmatic inconvenience precipitates emotional stress or crisis. While it is not Luke’s primary point, it is part of his underlying assumption, and if God is sovereign in Mary’s unplanned pregnancy, he is equally sovereign in unplanned pregnancy today. So we face any surprise with assurance that God is in control, and that this will work out for his glory and our blessing as we trust in him.

Day 3: Luke 2:41-52 The Son of God, but still the son of Joseph and Mary

In this vignette, Luke tentatively explores – or, more accurately perhaps, he records as Jesus, Joseph and Mary as tentatively exploring – the dynamics of a divine-human son. On the one hand, Jesus wanders from family to learn about God. (It should be noted that twelve years of age in Jesus’ time is not like being twelve years old in our time. In the first

century, Jewish men commonly married at 14-15 years of age, Jewish women at 12-13 years old. So being twelve in Jesus' era is more akin to being in college today, the stage just prior to independent adulthood.) On the other hand, though a spiritual prodigy (if not savant), sufficient to amaze trained rabbis, Jesus returned home with his parents, and submitted to their authority, while he continued to mature spiritually, cognitively, spiritually, and socially.

This text may be as tempting for parents to quote as it is annoying for teenagers to hear. Of course, Scripture addresses how parents treat their children, as much as how children treat their parents. For this text, and for this week, our focus is on the latter: if the 'nearly of marriage age' Jesus could obey his parents and mature under their oversight, how much more adolescents. Still, parents do well to remember that God also speaks to us about how we raise our children and what we expect of them.

Day 4: Luke 7:11-17 Help for a fallen people in a fallen world

The gospel of Jesus is not just ideas about God, though that is obviously a part of it. The gospel is not just about human obligation before God, though this too is obviously a part of it. The gospel is just as much – perhaps even more – about God entering the lives of his people. Not just their religious lives. But their personal lives. Their hopes and dreams, their disappointments and their griefs.

Here Jesus travels to a new town to extend his ministry. He is a celebrity surrounded by groupies. The sort of situation which could easily inflate anyone's sense of importance, not least the legitimately important Son of God. As he enters the city, Jesus' path intersects with a funeral procession, a grieving widow who previously lost her husband to an early death, and has now lost her son, the object of her deepest love (and her only source of survival). Distressed by her distress, he asks her not to cry. And then he solves the cause of her grief: he raises her son from the dead, and gives him back to his mother.

No child should ever die before a parent; no one should ever be left alone. But in our fallen world, both happen, and much else beside. Jesus' heart goes out to us. "God has come to help his people": not just in the grief of bereavement and the anxiety of poverty, but also in our broader fallenness within a fallen world.

Day 5: Luke 8:19-21 (cf. 11:27-28) A higher priority than family

Those of us acclimated to American culture are ill-suited to appreciate the scandal of Jesus' comments in these two texts. Traditional Asian culture

provides a better context. Confucianism provides an excellent case in point. Confucian virtue is predicated on five relationships, in order of priority: (1) ruler-subject, (2) father-son, (3) husband-wife, (4) older brother-younger brother, (5) friend-friend. Judaism in Jesus' time is less sexist: the Ten Commandments require obedience to both parents as one of cardinal biblical virtues. But both traditions prioritize the parent-child relationship, and no less, the parent-adult child relationship.

But for Jesus, spiritual relationships in some respect preempt even the most fundamental family relationships. "Your mother and brother are standing outside, waiting to see you." "Let them wait; my real mother and brothers are those standing here listening to me teach" (Luke 8:19-21). "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth" ... "No, rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:27-28).

Jesus was making one point to his contemporaries; in our context, this necessarily becomes two. Jesus prioritizes those who hear and implement his teaching even above his own flesh and blood. In our case, we (1) should prioritize family above all other social relationships (such as peers or friends); and then, (2) we rightly prioritize Christian community above that.

Day 6: Luke 14:25-35 The highest priority of all

Given that Jesus prioritizes his followers above his birth family, it comes as no surprise to find that he requires us to reciprocate, to prioritize him above our own birth families. "If anyone comes to me and does not [prioritize me far above] his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple."

Ironically, similar to what we noticed yesterday, Jesus might here be calling us to head in much the opposite direction as he called his contemporaries. American culture measures maturity by independence and differentiation from family; here youth can easily follow Christ even if their parents do not. In Asia, family loyalty outweighs religious obligation. Or, rather, religious obligation is an expression of family loyalty: children are to follow the religion of their parents (not least because they play a crucial role in the post-mortem care of deceased parents).

For contemporary Asians, Jesus elevates commitment to himself over commitment to family. In contemporary America, where commitment to peer friends outweighs loyalty to family. Jesus calls us to follow him even if it costs us our closest friendships. At the same time, he appears to assume that we will value family above peers, so this text may call us to reconsider our cultural priorities, and our tendency to undervalue family relationships, including our parents.