

Today's readings demonstrate the blessing of children and that all things are possible with the help of God even when a woman is apparently barren. In the Book of Judges, we learn that Manoah and his wife had no children. However, the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and brought her the good news that she would conceive and bear a son. She was given specific instructions to take no wine or strong drink and to eat nothing unclean. According to a recent study, as many as 1 in 20 children in the United States is harmed by prenatal alcohol exposure, so the advice to Manoah's wife is sound for every woman during pregnancy.<sup>i</sup> The birth of Samson was the result of a miracle and Samson was consecrated to God from the womb. As an adult, he delivered Israel from the power of the Philistines. Samson often failed to control his own urges and had many flaws. "Nevertheless, he was the chosen instrument of God, despite his obvious failings."<sup>ii</sup>

Just as Samson was a blessing and a savior for his people, God has a plan for each child. You may find that hard to believe given all of faults and failings of any given person or the bloodline they come from. But God thinks much differently than we do. "Pointing fingers and judging others are frequently signs of an inability to accept our own weaknesses, our own frailty. Only tender love will save us from the snares of the accuser. That is why it is so important to encounter God's mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we experience his truth and tenderness."<sup>iii</sup> The truth sets us free. God does not condemn us, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us. Liberated and delivered from weakness by the tender mercy of God, each person has a great potential to reach out and help others who may suffer from the same weakness.

The Gospel of Luke tells of a second miracle where the wife was thought to be barren. Elizabeth had prayed for a child for many years. In her old age when she was beyond the natural ability to have a child, her husband Zechariah received the Angel Gabriel who informed him that the couple would conceive a child and name him John. Zechariah was by all accounts a very holy man, but he doubted the angel. He was a man of faith who had prayed for a child as long as his wife had and yet he did not believe that all things were possible with the help of God.

We may have our own doubts about God's plans for our lives. In this Year of Saint Joseph, we recall Joseph had his doubts about Mary's faithfulness. "Joseph ... teaches us that faith in God includes believing that he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses ... we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course."<sup>iv</sup>

Zechariah was not as willing as Joseph and he lost his voice for 9 months. Nevertheless, God used the silence to communicate his hand in steering the course. When Zechariah came out of the temple sanctuary unable to speak, the onlookers understood his silence was the result of seeing a vision. Even in sickness or in infirmity, we may be a witness to the Good News.

Zechariah's son was John the Baptist, the herald of the Messiah, the man chosen by God to announce the coming of the savior. From within the womb, John began his ministry. He leapt at the presence of Jesus. Elizabeth sang God's praises throughout her pregnancy recognizing the grace present to allow her to conceive when she was beyond the years of fertility. In faith, Elizabeth also recognizes the grace involved in the miraculous conception of Jesus. Mary, "most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" Jesus (Lk 1:42).

The husband has doubts, the wife believes without question. God reconciles the disparity at the birth of John. Elizabeth went against tradition by naming her son John rather than Zechariah. She did not go against God for John was the name given by Gabriel. Zechariah confirms the name by writing on a tablet, "John is his name ... Immediately his mouth was

opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God” (Lk 1:63-64). Just as life is a gift from God, so to is our speech. In gratitude, we should always awake from silence by blessing God.

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people ... And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God” (Lk 1:68, 76-78).

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<sup>i</sup> [dhss.alaska.gov/osmap/Pages/fasd.aspx](http://dhss.alaska.gov/osmap/Pages/fasd.aspx)

<sup>ii</sup> Hahn, Scott, Catholic Bible Dictionary, p 809.

<sup>iii</sup> Patris Corde #2

<sup>iv</sup> #2