

## Advent 3 Reflection for 12 December 2021

Texts: Judges 13:2-7 Annunciation to the wife of Manoah; I John 3:1-3 Our Annunciation;  
Luke 1:46-56 Mary praises God

Rev. Dr. Barbara Fullerton at East Plains United Church, Burlington, Ontario

We are journeying through Advent, and possibly the whole Christian year for my remaining time with you, using *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* by an African-American womanist theologian, Dr. Wilda Gafny, a Hebrew biblical scholar and Episcopal priest. She is a Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School. It's a timely new approach that invites us to look at scripture differently than we ever have before. It's a completely inclusive translation, using no masculine pronouns for God, using many names for God, and using no masculine or feminine pronouns for people. Engaging in this kind of naming is explicitly called for in Communities of Faith as they become Affirming.

Reading with this kind of lens, I am especially conscious in the first reading that the woman who is told she will give birth to a son is not even named. Her husband is. His name is Manoah. And I am betting that some of you can guess what the name of her son will be. This message was given to Samson's mother-to-be. She was given instructions to herself follow the rules for a nazirite so that her fetus would not in any way be contaminated in utero.

Those who gave up smoking and those of us who gave up drinking alcohol and caffeine during our pregnancies understand that kind of thinking. It begs the question: If we treat our bodies differently for the sake of a child, why wouldn't we do it for our own sake?

So, what's a nazirite? It is someone who voluntarily takes a vow described in Numbers 6:1–21. "Nazirite" comes from the Hebrew word *nazir* meaning "consecrated" or "separated." Those who put themselves under a Nazirite vow do so by adding to themselves a degree of sanctity, as it says: "Until the time is completed, etc., they shall be holy." Usually there are three rules a nazirite follows:

1. Abstain from all wine and anything else made from the grape vine plant. (Traditional rabbinic authorities state that all other types of alcohol were permitted.)
2. Refrain from cutting the hair on one's head.
3. Avoid becoming ritually impure by contact with corpses or graves, even those of family members.<sup>1</sup>

In Samson's case, his mother was given only the first two rules.

Two examples of nazirites in the Hebrew Bible are Samson (Judges 13:5), and Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11). Both were born of previously barren mothers and entered into their vows through either their mothers' oath (as in the case of Hannah, or

a divine command (in the case of Samson), rather than by their own volition. These vows required Samson and Samuel to live devout lives, yet in return they received extraordinary gifts: Samson possessed strength and ability in physical battle against the Philistines, while Samuel became a prophet. We encountered the Annunciation story to Hannah, Samuel's mother, a few weeks ago and will reflect on it again in the fourth week of Advent. In this third week of Advent, we learn of the Annunciation to Samson's soon-to-be Mom, the un-named wife of Manoah.<sup>ii</sup>

The interesting thing about both these stories is that it was not the father who made the nazirite vow about the promised son. Fathers could do that, not mothers. Not so with Samson and Samuel. Their mothers were women who had received messages from God and stepped outside the traditional boundaries for women of their times.

So Samson's soon-to-be mother meets a messenger from God. This is often a figure of speech referring to God in disguise, or perhaps in drag, according to Wilda Gafney.<sup>iii</sup> Gafney suggests that if we read past today's verses, we will see how the "messenger" speaks in verses 3-4 in 3<sup>rd</sup> person, on God's behalf, but switches in verses 22-23 to speaking in 1<sup>st</sup> person, AS God. The unnamed woman who receives the message is held up as theologically astute enough to realize she has had a divine visitation.

Another thing to note in these Annunciation stories at which we are looking this Advent, is that if a woman had given birth to no babies, it was her fault. She was merely a fertile or infertile field to receive a man's "seed." It wasn't until 1876 that it was discovered that women contribute "seed" as well, in the form of ova. And no ancient Israelite could imagine that a man's seed was not viable, even though they surely had witnessed diseased or infertile plant seed.<sup>iv</sup>

Mary's Magnificat, or Song of Praise is part of the story we read last week of Mary going to visit her unexpectedly pregnant cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth's story echoed that of Sarah's, both giving birth in their very senior years. Sarah's son would be the father of nations. Elizabeth's son would be significant in introducing the ministry of Jesus. And young Mary, possibly in her teens, is also unexpectedly pregnant—definitely not in response to pleading to God for a child.

The Song of Praise that Mary sings at Elizabeth's home is not a thanksgiving for fertility in the place of barrenness. She didn't ask for the baby she was carrying. Like Samson's mother, Mary is carrying a significant baby. And her pregnancy is unique in the Judeo-Christian tradition as a supposedly virgin birth. (Though that myth was not rare in other cultures.)

Mary's thanksgiving is definitely not about being pregnant, but about what this Child will be about in their life. As an Advent reading, Mary's Song calls us to that life and that work for God's kin-dom of justice as we follow the One to whom she would give birth.

Today's Epistle reading endearingly brings us into these Annunciation stories, too. I referred to it in the bulletin as Our Annunciation story. The writer announces that we are children of God, called to great things which will become more apparent some day.

We can join Mary's song of joy, praising God for God's justice. We can find joy in being part of what Jesus did in his lifetime, living out God's justice.

Today is called Joy Sunday, the Sunday depicted in the Advent wreath with a pink candle. It's a departure from the other more subdued themes of hope, peace, and love. It's a week to pull out the stops, finding joy in every corner. Joining the joy of Samson's mother, of old Elizabeth, and of Mary, each with different reasons for joy.

Be attentive to Joy this week! You will find it all around!

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<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazirite>, accessed on 11 Dec 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> A fun tidbit that has nothing to do with this theological reflection is that my Grandmother's middle name was Delilah, the name of the woman who eventually cut Samson's hair, causing him to break his nazirite vow. Who names their daughter Delilah? Evidently my greatgrandmother! Named my grandma the delicious name of Mary Delilah.

<sup>iii</sup> Wilda Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church Year W*, 2021, pg. 9

<sup>iv</sup> I can personally attest that this attitude was still around in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when I was put through testing and surgery and fertility drugs for 5 years before a new doctor decided to check out my then-partner and discovered he could not likely get anyone pregnant. Within two weeks of treating him with steroids, I was carrying our beloved Keira.