Honey Badger Mums

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo on Mothering Sunday, 15th March 2021, to the Diocese of Guildford

**Exodus 2:1-10**

*Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. 3When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.*

*5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. ‘This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,’ she said. 7Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?’ 8Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Yes.’ So the girl went and called the child’s mother. 9Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.’ So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, ‘because’, she said, ‘I drew him out of the water.’*

**1 Sam 1:20-28**

*20In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked him of the Lord.’*

*The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. 22But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, ‘As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there for ever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.’23Her husband Elkanah said to her, ‘Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may the Lord establish his word.’ So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. 24When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh; and the child was young. 25Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. 26And she said, ‘Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. 27For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. 28Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.’*

*She left him there for the Lord.*

**Luke 2:33-35**

*33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’*

**John 19:25-27**

*25And that is what the soldiers did.*

*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ 27Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

Happy Mother’s Day. The lectionary offers a bumper range of alternatives for Mothering Sunday, but looking at them – what strikes me is how each demands immense investment and courage, and yet how each also exhibits the capacity to detach. We start with the mother of Moses in Exodus 2 who secretly deposits her illegal child in the bulrushes, then later serves to raise him but at the behest of the Pharaoh’s daughter. Then there’s Hannah, someone who struggled for years to become a mother, then commits the precious child she births back to God in 1 Samuel 1. And there’s Mary, mother of our Lord. I know she’s not quite the normal mother and yet she functions as an archetype of motherhood. And the two moments in the readings ascribed for today leave us in no doubt about her courage in the face of challenge. First, at the outset of her parenting, there’s that startling statement from Simeon at the dedication of the child in the temple (Luke 2)– ‘and a sword will pierce you heart too’ – and then there’s that moment when the sword does its most piercing work in John 19, watching her precious son die on a cross. So take your pick, folks… but wherever you focus, you can’t but recognise the courage and cost of motherhood. It demands everything – from the secret or struggle or surprise of conception, to the risk of childbirth, to letting go and trusting God with that which is most precious, to the possibility, the injustice, the sheer agony, of being unable to protect the child you have raised from the place of risk, of danger, ultimately of death.

This Mothering Sunday I wonder for whom you give thanks; and which mothers come to mind who fit any of those descriptions. Before the days of modern medicine it was widely understood that motherhood involved risk all the way through – not least because giving birth itself is a risky business; that is still the case in many parts of the world. I remember an afternoon spent sitting chatting with a tremendous group of leaders from the Mother’s Union in Renk, South Sudan when I was teaching there. As we enjoyed the shade of a tree and shared a couple of (luxurious, ice cold!) Fantas we exchanged our life stories amidst laughter and tears. It was beautiful. I learned that between those five women, they had conceived (as I recall) over 40 children, but brought to live birth just 30 of them. Of those 30, 19 made it to their 18th birthday – less than 1 in 2 of those conceived. And since – owing to circumstances of war and disease and hunger, just 7 of those 19 were still alive. You have to be brave to be a mum in South Sudan. Or in Scripture. And also, I want to suggest today, in Surrey or Sussex, (or Hampshire, or Greater London). Forget tiger moms, and soccer mums, and helicopter mums. We’re talking here about Honey Badger Mums. The Honey Badger is considered the bravest most fearless animal in the world – at least the Guinness Book of Records says so.

So I want to explore the courage of motherhood through the eyes of Hannah and Mary. One is OT and the other NT yet both fulfil what we might call a ‘motherhood type-scene’ where there’s a story to do with conception followed by a determined commitment to raise the child to know God and to love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and strength. That involves a level of costly courage in fulfilling that commitment, which turns out to lie beyond what they ever thought they could manage. There you have it. Conception. Commitment. Courage. I think that just about covers the biblical contours of motherhood. And Honey Badgers.

1. Conception

For Hannah, getting pregnant is an answer to countless prayers and a cause for a special psalm of thanks to God. Her counterparts today have not only have been on their knees for years but (at least in the West) also been through painstaking medical examinations, stressful hospital appointments and perhaps decisions about IVF. Where the outcome is successful the rejoicing is all the greater: a situation where there’s no doubting the hand of God at work. The prospect of motherhood lies beyond any human capacity to create or control. It’s a moment to pause and recognise the sheer grace of God.

Mary’s experience of conception is quite the opposite of Hannah’s. It was not sought or expected; indeed it didn’t even seem possible. It comes like a bolt out of the blue and it’s all very embarrassing. Yet with a little help, Mary also embraces it as a cause for rejoicing at God’s remarkable work. She too sings a psalm – more often it’s called the Magnificat, remarkably similar to Hannah’s if you put them in parallel – because she’s come to recognise this pregnancy as a sign – a sign not just to her but to every generation - of the sheer grace of God.

For anyone listening who is currently pregnant: make this mothering Sunday a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving. Write a psalm, exclaim your praise, voice to God a recognition that this is not your doing: it’s God’s doing.

For any who long to become pregnant: I wonder today if you can turn your longing for a child into a turning to God, so that every time you pine you pray. I wonder if you can keep going like Hannah so that whatever happens this may be a time when you grow in faith, in determination to give God your future, in flexibility at God’s calling, whatever happens.

And to any who have become pregnant unexpectedly, perhaps those for whom it’s a problem or an embarrassment: can this moment become a new moment for turning to God with your questions, seeking God’s face and God’s grace where shame has no place? That’s Mary’s experience. Where God is invited in, God has a habit of working things out, of turning surprise into delight, fate into destiny, making even broken situations beautiful.

1. Commitment

When it comes to commitment, we’re given a moving picture of the dedication of each child to God, following the Jewish custom in the temple. The ritual expresses the parent’s commitment to God – their dedication to raise the child in the knowledge and love of God, exactly as with parents and Godparents at a baptism. Equally it acknowledges God’s commitment to the child and invites the parents to let go, to recognise that the child belongs to God. In a sense motherhood demands that we’re all in, investing everything in raising the child, and yet that we hold that huge investment very lightly, ever ready to give it all away.

That’s particularly striking with Hannah and Samuel. You might wonder if now that Hannah has what she’d been dreaming of for decades, that she wouldn’t let him out of her sight, that she might never let go, that she’d become crazy protective, a helicopter mum. But in fact what we find is quite the opposite: the logic of recognising God’s hand at the conception is followed by a recognition that this child would not and could not be, without God. He belongs to God, and is dedicated to God’s service. Hannah offers him up. For Hannah, motherhood involves the duty and privilege of letting the child go, trusting the child most fully to God. That reminds me of some friends I know whose young daughter expressed a sense of call to a religious community and recently made her lifelong vows there. Most definitely it took a journey for the parents to get to a place where they could delight in her commitment, but it’s a journey they now rejoice over.

1. Courage

Commitment usually takes courage. And in my experience when courage is required it always exceeds that which you think you can muster. Just think of motherhood this past year – who among us would have ever supposed they could manage locked down at home with toddlers, or home-schooling children alongside their work. No scope for soccer moms even to meet! You may not always have felt you were managing it very well but if you’re still here this Sunday exactly a year on from the last Sunday we were able to gather before churches closed their doors, then surely you’ve found courage. Bravo, well done. Enjoy some daffodils.

And now, when it comes to courage, let’s come back to Mary – she who, at the very point of dedicating her child to the God who gave him, is told by wise old Simeon, ‘*this child is destined* *for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed’.* She’s warned her precious beautiful baby is going to find himself in trouble, to meet opposition, to walk a costly path. Surely that’s about as hard as it gets for a mother to hear, one whose instincts are all about nurture and protection. And just in case she hadn’t already realised the cost of that, Simeon adds, ‘*and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’*

I think I’ve come to the conclusion that you don’t have a child if you want to protect yourself. As someone put it when our firstborn arrive, from now on you’ll feel like you’re wearing your heart on the outside. Is there anything more painful for a mother, a parent, than seeing the precious child you’ve raised die – the one to whom you gave life, the one who is due to survive you, the one with whom you’d gladly exchange your life. And Mary saw Jesus die the ugliest most violent shameful death there was. Most of us don’t get to know what motherhood costs until we get there, and probably it’s a good job we don’t or we might not manage it. But Mary is warned what lies ahead: and still she says Yes to God. There we see the ultimate in courageous motherhood.

That kind of courage does not grow on trees. Where is it found (apart from in Honey Badgers?) I put it to you that it is something grown. Grown within the contours of motherhood we’ve already explored. The response of both Hannah and Mary to their pregnancies demonstrates their readiness to attribute all life to God. That is the glorious surprise of conception, which owes little to our human agency. And so God’s grace underpins the calling to motherhood – we mothers would not be, we could not be, but for God. So let’s not take motherhood for granted, from the earliest moment of its prospect.

And if conception calls for thanksgiving, then so does birth - and every landmark thereafter. If conception is only through grace, the logic of dedicating the child to God surely follows. Recognising our children as belonging to God – not to us – is not a one-off ceremony but a habit we surely need to cultivate so that we live into the logic: committing the child that was ever a gift back to God, again and again. We practice letting go. Thus a child is never a trophy, a boast, an achievement, an accessory – there’s no place for tiger moms in God’s kingdom. The child is a sign of God’s grace, a excuse for God’s praise, an agent for God’s service. We may pay the bills but God gets the glory. We invest everything… and then we give it away. Quietly growing in courage at every stage, so we’re ready for the consequences.

As I end I can’t resist telling you about a very favourite book from those precious bedtime-story days of early motherhood. It’s not about a Honey Badger; the titles is *Mole and the Baby Bird* by Marjorie Newman. One day Mole finds a baby bird, injured and alone. Very carefully he takes it home and shapes his life to look after it. As it grows there are touching ways in which he adjusts and adapts to a creature he’s devoted to but doesn’t fully comprehend – like trying to fly, for instance. Guided by two wonderful parents and a very thoughtful grandfather, Mole finds himself having to explore the greatest dilemma of all: if the baby bird is going to be a pet or if it is going to be free; ultimately, if it belongs to him, or not. He’s invested everything: and yet, and yet… it seems to want to fly. It’s a journey which is gospel-shaped for motherhood, parenthood: from conception (or rather, adoption) through commitment to courage. But that final step from commitment to courage does take some practice…

 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIaTPljiiVk>