

## Sermon on Judges 13: 1-14 Samson

The first quarter of the Bible is taken up with a long story about the people of God, the people of Israel. It begins with a poem and stories about the creation of the world and the first human beings, and then has a wonderful collection of stories about their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah and their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Next the story tells how the people of God find themselves slaves in Egypt, and how God and his friend Moses rescue them. It speaks of a sea split into two; of a journey through a dry, stony desert to the holy mountain of God; of God's ten commandments; of the people turning their backs on God and making a new god out of gold. That hurts God a great deal, but he still travels on from Sinai with the people. He promised to give them a land of their own, and he cannot go back on his promises.

Yet they take so long to get there that by the time they reach the Jordan valley, which marks its boundary, all but a tiny handful of those who escaped from Egypt and came to God's mountain have died.

The people of God are now formed by the new generation that has been born in the desert. Moses hands on to them the teaching he received from God at the holy mountain.

Now the people are ready to cross the Jordan and begin their life in the new land. Moses will not go with them. He dies on the top of a mountain at the far side of the valley. But Joshua, who has also survived since the escape from Egypt, takes over the leadership.

That is where we pick up the story that I am preaching on today.

It is taken from the book of Judges, chapter 13, verses 1-14.

To explain some of its background: it wasn't an easy life that the Israelites lived in the new land. They didn't have the best fields and the strongest towns. The people already living in the land had those. And there were serious threats from outside the land, too; particularly from a neighbouring people called the Philistines.

Many years after Moses and Joshua, the Philistines gained control over the whole land and held power for a generation. To the Israelites this seemed to go on for ever. And they could clearly see that they needed a new strong leader, a hero.

In the OT reading from the book of Judges we heard about the Israelite couple who lived close to where the Philistines had set up their places of power. The husband was called Manoah, and his wife was Eluma. They had no children. Just as in Abraham's and Sarah's story the years went by, but there was no sign of a child. Childlessness in those days was hard to bear. Especially for the women, since everybody thought, it was their fault if no children were born.

Children were needed to look after the old parents one day, to take over the farm and continue the family line. But not so for Eluma and Manoah.

Eluma, like Hannah, prayed for nothing more than for a child.

And then one day her little room was filled with light. And God's angel spoke to her face to face – just like a human being. "You will have a child", the angel told her. And he added that the child would be a son with a special purpose, and that

Eluma therefore had to take good care of herself. And once her son was grown, he would be saving Israel from the Philistines...

Eluma went and told her husband. But Manoah wanted to see this man of God himself. He wanted to know what's going on. God heard Manoah's prayer and did send the man / the angel again. But again he came when Eluma was on her own. She ran and fetched her husband who spoke not very friendly with the stranger. Blinded by jealousy and suspicion, Manoah couldn't recognise the angel of God, but thought this was someone who had no right to get close to his wife. When he found out that this really was the man of God who'd predicted the birth of their child, he insisted on getting more information, but all the angel said was: Let the woman tell you what I commanded her...

...an amazing story, don't you agree?

It is the story of a barren woman to whom an angel announces the birth of a special child. This is not the only place in the Bible where something like that happens. We all know similar events, just think of Isaac's birth promised to Abraham and Sarah, Samuel's birth promised to Hannah, and John's birth promised to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

All these special children become extraordinary men... leaders in the contexts in which they lived. And so do Moses, who was rescued in that little box, and Jesus whose birth was also announced by an angel... There is quite a tradition in the Bible of special children being born under special circumstances...

What is unique in Samson's story (that is Eluma's and Manoah's boy's name) is that even before he is born there is much emphasis on the special purpose and the call in his life, and the extraordinary care the mother is asked to take of herself and the unborn baby.

The main characters of the story are: God, speaking through an angel, a mother and a father.

God means well and has the angel give instructions to Eluma about how she should take care of her son Samson. The angel does not come first of all to guide or protect the child, but instead comes to the mother to give her some advice of how to raise this child.

"Create the space your child will need to live up to his calling," the angel seems to say. "Let your child be pure and holy and consecrated. Let your child be a blessing..."

Wouldn't we all love to listen to such, and make sure that God's image can be seen in the faces of our children – as well as in our lives?

The angel in the story wants to lead the parents onto God's path – away from pressure and expectation of the society that surrounds them. ...again something that we may want to try to apply to our life and our families' lives, too?!

On top of all that the angel tells the mother to which conditions she's got to stick: "Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean..."

Not to drink beer or wine, not to eat anything unclean is of course a sentence that nowadays needs some interpretation. Maybe today we'd say "Make sure you stay

strong and healthy, so you are able to care for your child and nourish him properly... Make sure you have a clear conscience and some wise awareness, and an alert spirit, when you walk life's road with your child. Don't flee from life itself, from reality, from the needs of your child. Be there for him (or her) and help them experience love and acceptance, encouragement and appreciation. And if you can't protect them from the experiences of disappointment, fear and resignation, then lead them through and help them to grow through them. See what is special in your child...individual, lovable, unique!"

The mother in our story is told not to cut the child's hair. This of course needs some explanation and interpretation, as well.

Hair in those times was regarded a symbol for a person's strength and freedom. The angel instructs the parents not to rob the strength from their child. So, in other words, today's angel might tell us to not use our children for our own purposes but help them to become who they are meant to be in the eyes of God... to take our children seriously and support them to find the important source of energy in their lives, which for me surely is God. God, his love and his grace!

I believe that if we are sensitive and listen to our angels speaking to us, we can help our children to find God in their lives. And I also understand that the instructions of the angel in our story do not only apply to parents, but to all of us... and to the ways how we treat our fellow human beings.

But back to the human beings in our story... the parents of the special child-to-be.

The angel of God speaks to the woman. And the woman and man react as only human beings can react.

Already when the wife tells her husband, she exaggerates slightly. Had the angel said: "...for the boy shall be consecrated to God from birth...", the woman now says "from birth to his death". Why is she doing that? Are there worries which she's already got? Fears? Doubts? Mistrust? Is God's message not powerful enough? Why does she feel the need of making more of it?

Why on earth is she doing this? She seems to need to confirm that for the whole of his life her son will rest safely in God's hands and be guided on God's ways...

The father of the child, who doesn't meet the angel in person, but is told the story instead, wants to know it all absolutely exactly. The tale of his wife is not enough for him. He calls the angel back to ask him again. But when the angel appears a second time, Manoah again is not around. His wife runs quickly and gets him. But confronted with Manoah's further questions, the angel simply says: "I have told your wife all you need to know..." "Why not ask her" – he seems to suggest. Great news for all women. God speaks to us in this story, and the husbands shall believe what we've got to tell them 😊

However – let's have a closer look at the father-to-be and his urge to know more. This man would love to be given divine instructions and recipes; some kind of guarantee of how to succeed in raising a nice and decent child...

We all could do with a bit of that, couldn't we?

But the angel refuses to give such recipes. “Observe all that I commanded you,” he says – nothing more and nothing less. If you want your children to live in a way that pleases God, then you yourself have to listen to God’s word and do his will. As simple as that!

Be a role model – that is all you can give to your children.

Okay?!

And on top of that, I suppose, we all need a lot of trust... in God, and in our sons and daughters and the example that we are able to give to them.

We are not left alone with this task. We are fortunately members of a community of believers, we belong to God’s family, and if we are open to it, we will never fail to recognise God’s advice for ourselves and for those who we live with.

This is in a way, where we could come to an end for today.

Let us instead have a very brief look into Samson’s future:

Samson, the very special child, grew up – maybe with too many hopes and expectations weighing on him heavily.

He did break the Philistines’ grip on God’s people. But he was not the man to make God’s greatest plan come true. God wanted all the families of the earth to find blessing through the descendants of Abraham. But Samson was not the man for that job. Samson’s story is full of blood, tears and revolution. It sets a start for a process of liberation but it fails in bringing it about entirely.

Samson’s life surely was outstanding and unique, but he was constantly chasing after showing and proving how brilliant, special and bright he was...

In the end that cost him his life.

And I wish somebody would have just for once, sat down with Samson, put his or her arm around the hero’s shoulders and encouraged him to give it all a break.

“Stop chasing after recognition and honour for a moment, and simply understand, how much you are loved by God – ever since you were conceived in your mother’s womb...”

God loves you – no matter what you are running after or what you have already achieved in your life! God loves you – no matter what!

May we all take this as the great promise over our own, our children’s, and our fellow human beings’ lives.

God loves you.

And this love never ends.

Because: God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Live in love, and if you live in love, you live in God, and God lives in you and in those you love...

Wouldn’t this be the most beautiful and appropriate sentence for an angel of God to give us as instruction about how to take care of each other?

Well, then let’s do it!