

## A Tale of Two Births

Isaiah 52:7-10

Luke 1:57-2:7

I was reflecting on today's scripture passage, particularly on a detail that we somehow skipped, when I was reminded of something I read a very long time ago. It was "Zachariah (that's John the Baptist's father) said (to God): "Oh come on now! Be sensible! Not me! My wife and I are too old to have any kids." And God said, "Oh, shut up!" And he did shut up — for nine months. And John was born, and the way for the Christ opened up."<sup>1</sup>

We might have skipped it, but the reason that Zachariah asks for materials to write with, when asked about the naming of his son, is because when he challenged God about this child's birth, he did indeed lose the power of speech for the duration of his wife's pregnancy. His power of speech was restored as soon as he confirmed that his son's name was John.

Did it really happen that way? We don't know. But what we do know for sure is that it is very important to Luke that we understand the miraculous nature of the two births, of boys who were related and who were destined to play significant roles in the lives of many people of faith.

Luke has often been called an apologist, one who wrote an explanation of the Good News so that the authorities would understand that there was nothing to fear from these followers of the Christ. But he was also concerned to emphasize how this message was meant for ALL people, not simply for Jews. Luke's Gospel shows a preference for the poor, hence Mary is not a well-born young

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<sup>1</sup> God is No Fool by Lois A. Cheney, Abingdon Press, 1969, p 130

woman, but a woman from a poor family. And Elizabeth, mother of John, is an older woman, a woman who has been shamed because she was childless, and now, like Sarah, she has born a child in her old age.

It is no accident that Luke provides us with these details. They are very important to Luke, not for whether or not they are factual, but because they reflect Luke's understanding and faith in God, a God who cares for the poor, for those who have shunned or shamed, a God who welcomes even the Gentile into the fold of believers.

When we recognise that our stories may not be factual, it is not to discredit them, but to recognise instead the focus of the message, what it is that the evangelist is seeking to share with us. We, on the other hand, are the products of this era, this age of instant communication, of the need for factual veracity, and forget that our Gospels are not the equivalent of newspaper accounts, but are the recorded memories, thoughts and inspiration of those who have lived with the story for many years, and are only now writing it down because there is a fear that the story will be lost when the first eye witnesses die. Luke's was not the first Gospel to be written. That honour goes to Mark. And if you read Mark very carefully, you will see that there is absolutely no reference to any birth stories at all. Most scholars and theologians date Luke's gospel as being written somewhere between the years 70 and 100 in the Common Era – which means after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and many years after the original events.

Luke is a preacher, out to teach us what he feels is most important about our faith. He cares about the poor and isolated; he cares about those who have previously been excluded from the good

news, and is anxious for us to understand that God's message and care are for all.

So what is he telling us about John and Jesus when he gives us these two birth accounts, complete with miraculous details? He's telling us that these two figures are important. He's signalling from the very first that we should pay attention, that these two babies will grow to be men who play significant roles in the lives of many, that they are from the very beginning, children in a special relationship with God, and that this relationship flowers into producing men who live their lives in testimony to this special relationship with God.

We like to get misty eyed at Christmas. We like stories about babies. But Luke summons us to more than that. Luke does not deal casually with any of the details. There is always a reason, and a purpose behind what he has included, and what he has not.

And so we start with John, whose birth resonates with that of a father of the faith: the child of a woman past child-bearing years, and a father who is God's servant. When the power of speech is restored to Zachariah, he declares that John will be a prophet, that he will prepare the way for the Christ. John is part of the present age of faith, born of that age, with a message to those people. But his role? His role is to herald the end of an era, the end of an age, the end of a way of knowing God, and to prepare the way for a new way, a new era, a new age and understanding: he is to herald the way for Mary's son.

For Mary's son's birth is also miraculous – but not in a way that resonates with the past. This child's birth heralds a new miracle, a new way of being and of doing. And so, although God is active in the conceptions and births of both babies, in John's case, the miracle is a

familiar one. In Jesus' case, it is a new and surprising birth, a new way of God participating, a preparation for one whose ministry will signal the beginning of the new way of relating to God, of being faithful to God, or understanding God.

Luke's message is a powerful one. It was powerful to the people to whom he was explaining the "new way." It is no less powerful to us.

For Luke is challenging us to celebrate the birth of John, knowing that it heralds the end of an era for us as well. John's birth reminds us that God is and always has been active in our lives, throughout the past and right up to today. But John's birth challenges us to be ready for the endings, all those uncomfortable or sad changes ....

So that we can be ready for the new beginnings which Jesus' birth heralds: Ready to recognise new ways of relating to God; ready to respond in new ways to the challenges that lies before us; ready to open up and respond to the invitation, and open-eyed with wonder that God's message is to the lowly, to those who have no power, to those who have been shamed or shunned or ignored.

No powerful Magi appear in Luke's story. It's the shepherds who hear the news and bear homage. Poor men who live a rough life and who have little or nothing to bear as gifts ... only themselves.

We are now in the year of the Gospel According to Luke. We will be invited to share the excitement that the new age and era brings, challenged to embrace new ways of expressing our faith. We will be stimulated, humbled and embraced.

But first? First we take the time to celebrate the births of two little boys, two little boys whose births herald so much more than

simply the joy of new life in two small families. For God is working miracles through them, to bring us good news, even in the painful endings, and the challenges that lie there, to assure us that new life lies ahead and to herald the promise of so much more. Thanks be to God! Amen.