

A Failed Fertility

Judges 13:1-25

Brothers and Sisters, it has been a long time since we've studied the story of Samson – in fact it has been 10 years since we presented it as part of our annual Breakfast Theatre series...

If you've been around Valleyview that long you might remember that in the 2011 drama presentation we had a young Chris Smith playing the angel, Laurie Brenton was Manoah's wife...

We also had Shawnie Fesyk playing Delilah, and Jeff Sutherland's little girls – Heather and Charlotte, who are now both driving and moving on to post-secondary schooling, they played the little foxes that Samson used to burn down the Philistine's grain fields ... but that's a bit farther ahead in the story.

I don't want to get too far ahead in this year's Reader's Theatre presentation of Samson as I'm reminiscing about the 2011 Breakfast Theatre version.

But it is fun when things like this come around again and we can reminisce and remember the past as we see – or hear – things that remind us what we've done.

But we can also see things that remind us of what we haven't done - can't we.

For instance, I have a collection of vinyl records and a turntable in my home music studio – and when I look at them I remember that when I was 16 years old I had an opportunity to buy a DJ set-up that consisted of two Technique 1200's and a mixer and a whole bunch of records for only \$300 – this was an insanely good deal – but I hesitated and turned it down because I wasn't certain about it... but over the years as I've seen turntables come back into use and seen how expensive they are and how vinyl is popular once again... I've always wished that I had bought that DJ set.

Maybe you have a similar reminder of something you didn't do but now you wished you had... finishing off a degree, going on a trip, competing in a tournament or a contest, a job-offer

to work overseas or a promotion – but for whatever reason you didn't do it... and there is something that reminds you of this whenever you look at it.

I think that many of us Valleyviewers have this with the front entrance on our church building... right? Whenever we come in the “front door” downstairs and we find ourselves in that tiny little lobby and then we have to go over to the stairwell and make our way upstairs in order to “enter” into what feels like the church building – it reminds us that when we built this facility – we had to save some money and cut some costs – so that's where we found our savings.

But every time we come in; it always reminds us that we didn't put in a proper front entrance doesn't it.

Now, its one thing to regret not having done something about how our building was designed, or missing out on a good deal for audio equipment – it's a whole other level of regret when you have something in your life that reminds you of not having done something that God had commanded you to do.

And as we start to delve into the story of Samson, before we get too far ahead of ourselves in anticipating the more spectacular exploits of his strength which typically attract our attention, we need to note how the scriptures want us to focus our attention on something that had been left undone with making a geographical reference to Mahaneh Dan.

Mahaneh Dan is located in the hill country of the promised land, just east of Jerusalem and it overlooks the Sorek Valley to the south west – you can see the location on the map on the powerpoint...

And if you were looking into the Sorek Valley from Mahaneh Dan it is a beautiful view even today as you can see – and it would have been just as beautiful back in biblical times not only because of the scenery but because it was prime agricultural land – a valuable commodity in those days. Its wide fields could be easily plowed and planted and it had a readily accessible source of water running through it – it was a nice piece of real estate.

But this lovely view only served to remind the tribe of Dan that they had failed to completely conquer the Promised Land and take full possession of their inheritance.

You see brothers and sister in spite of the amazing victories which took place when the Israel first entered the Promised Land, like taking the city of Jericho, once the Israelites had gained a secure foothold in the land some of the tribes for one reason or another did not completely drive out the nations which God had told them destroy.

And the tribe of Dan was one of those tribes – and as we discover in Judges 1:34 *“The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain.”*

So the tribe of Dan had to settle for living in the hill country, bordering the Amorites who eventually were replaced by the Philistines – who, as you can see on the map - kept them from taking the best of the land which God had promised to them.

Now, you would think this would be a bit of a sore point for the Danites, that they would consider the Philistines and all they stood for as their mortal enemies and that they would always be looking for a way to defeat them, drive them out, and take the territory that God had allotted to them.

You would think it would be this way, but it wasn't.

In fact it was the opposite, while the Danites did despise the Philistines, their culture and way of life rubbed off on them and pretty soon the Danites, and the rest of Israel as well were worshipping the gods of the Philistines and had forgotten about the Covenant relationship they had with God and their responsibilities in it.

So, when they forgot about worshipping God, God would forget about protecting them – as we heard at the beginning of scene 1 this morning *“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.”* And when the oppression finally became too much to bear, Israel would clue in and remember

to call out to God and God would raise up a hero to deliver Israel and lead them as a nation.

And as long as the hero was alive – Israel would stay faithful, but once the hero died they would go right back to their old ways.

And as this cycle of disobedience, oppression and repentance repeated itself over several generations the people of Israel just became complacent about it, this was how things were and thus with each cycle things became progressively worse so that even the heroes God raised up were not righteous anymore – as we will see with the story of Samson...

So we begin the story of Samson, the last hero that God would raise up to deliver His people in this cycle of covenant unfaithfulness and as the story begins in Mahaneh Dan overlooking the beautiful view of the Sorek Valley it is a reminder that the Danites had failed to take this fertile piece of land from the Philistines – but that’s just the way it was,

that’s the way it had been... for a long time and no body was bothered enough to do anything about it.

And not only does the geography remind of us this, we see this dynamic reflected in the relationship between Manoah and his wife also.

Manoah’s name means “rest” – but in his case it’s not a good rest like the kind that comes after a hard fought victory – it’s more like a lazy rest. He’s a lethargic fellow – slothful!

In fact if we were to diagnose their childlessness today the tests would show he has “*lazy little swimmers*” – and that’s why his wife can’t get pregnant.

His wife seems to have the potential for fertility, and perhaps Manoah has tried in the past but has failed to get her pregnant, and so now he seems to have given up – and so his wife stays barren for a long time – that’s just the way it was, and they had sort of accepted it.

Manoah's complacent apathetic character is mirrored in his reproductive inabilities and of course this illustrates his spiritual condition – and that of all of Israel as well.

Things were not good in the Promised Land, things were not good for the nation of Israel, but nobody was complaining about it, nobody was going to do anything about it, in fact nobody was even asking God to do anything about it.

But... God decided to do something about it anyways, and doesn't that just speak volumes about who God is? It reminds me of that verse in Romans 5:8 *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

God is going to help out the people he has made a covenant with, in spite of the fact that they aren't even making an effort to repent, or even cry out to Him – because their relationship was barren, just like the relationship between Manoah and his wife.

And brothers and sisters whenever you see a childless woman in the stories of the bible – this is an indicator as to where, or rather with whom God is going to start taking action. God starts his work in the place where human efforts have so obviously failed to bring about conception – the creation of a new life.

And while these instances where God brings life from barrenness and makes fertility possible again certainly give hope to give those who are struggling to conceive and want to have children – they are applicable to all of us because they teach all of us the ultimate truth about our human nature and show us the limits of what our amazing God giving abilities can do about it.

You see brothers and sisters the truth is that we all start out spiritually barren. We may come into this world biologically and psychologically alive – but we are spiritually dead.

You see when the bible talks about our spirituality it is referring to our capacity to desire to love God, to want to

serve Him, to be eager to obey Him, to be enthusiastic respond to Him, to stay faithful to Him in the face of temptation and be loyal to His plans above our own.

But the sad truth is that we are all born without this desire, the capacity is just not there. To be sure the potential certainly is – after all we are made in God’s image and nothing can rid us of that...

But what the Bible calls SIN is the state of existence we are born into where there is no life, no fertility and no ability for us to make anything of that potential to respond to God – it is dead, it is barren.

This is what the Apostle Paul speaks about in Ephesians 2:1 when he says *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”*

So whenever we see God causing the conception of new life in the relationship of a barren woman and an impotent man in

scripture it teaches us that only God can breathe spiritual life into us so that we desire to respond to Him.

It teaches us that no amount of effort on our part - and think of all the effort a couple goes through when they try to conceive a child, and the additional efforts that they are willing to undertake when conception seems to have failed....

that no amount of effort on our part can create that desire, that enthusiasm, that willingness to respond to God, and bring it to life within us. God himself must do it – and the good news is that He does.

So, the Angel of the Lord appears to Manoah’s wife and tells her that she will have a child.

What wonderful news, finally after all these years – a child. Their union will finally bear fruit, she will be able to nurture and care and give a mother’s love. She will have a son who will take care of her in her old age, an heir so Manoah can pass on their estate – maybe she might even live to see her son have children – what a thought, grandkids!

But how do Manoah and his wife receive this news? Brothers, and sisters so often when God breaks into our lives and begins to bring new life and blessings, the fact is that we've been spiritually dead for so long - our first response is often an inappropriate one.

Now I don't mean inappropriate in the manner of a fellow who had lived a rough life but one day experienced God telling him to go to church one Sunday so he could hear about Jesus, and so he went but he was so nervous about going and especially in front of all the good folks in his town that he drank half a 2-4 of beer to settle his nerves and took his dog with him – I don't mean that kind of inappropriate...

I mean the kind of inappropriate response which thinks that we've stumbled on to some kind of golden goose, a self-interested response to God's initiatives in our lives – and we see this in how Manoah and his wife respond.

When Manoah's wife reports what the angel had said - she fails to mention that this child will deliver Israel from the Philistines! Why does she ignore this??

And what about Manoah... well he becomes jealous and suspicious when he hears the news. Since he hasn't been able to give his wife a child he's wondering if perhaps she's had an indiscretion out in the field with a some stranger and is now trying to pass off her soon-to-be obvious pregnancy by saying a man of God, a prophet had come and told her she would have a child, to make him think the resulting child was his.

And so he prays – but it's not a prayer of thanks or for guidance but a request proof so he can be sure nothing funny has gone on.

But again God's good character contrasts our - God humors Manoah and sends the angel a second time, but when the angel comes Manoah confronts the him – are you the one who *"talked"* with my wife... and did nothing else???

And even though Manoah is lazy he wants to be in full control of the situation – so he says “**when** your words are fulfilled” meaning since you have not impregnated my wife, when *I* get around to giving her a child, how should **we** raise him? You stay away, keep your distance... we’ll be able to do this on our own thank you very much.

And Manoah also figures that there may be some opportunity to advantage of here – it’s not everyday you come across a prophet... maybe they can put him in their debt by hosting him for dinner and he will owe them a favor back... if they can learn his name maybe they can track him down and consult him in the future if they need to... It can be handy to know someone like this.

So, brothers and sisters – how do we react when God takes the initiative in our lives? What are some of the ways we’ve responded inappropriately when God works in our lives or in the lives of those who are close to us?

Maybe we get jealous that God has become so important their lives; we can resent the fact that we are no longer needed in some way - because God is working in their life...

Or maybe we might try to set some terms and conditions when God works in our life, right? We might say – listen God it was my decision to follow you and so this is what I’m willing to give you, that’s it – I’ll go to church on Sundays but going out to bless someone, sorry I’m not comfortable with that.

Or maybe we realize that we’ve come across something very useful in our lives – when God does things it can make our dreams come true. He can give us peace, security, blessings, an insight into the future, an edge over the competition... He’s there to help us in our times of dire need... So we look for a way to get an angle on God so we can get those blessings – pragmatic religion.

Brothers and sisters, whether we’re just experiencing God breaking into our lives for the first time, or whether we’ve

been experiencing His activity in our lives for years – we must always be wary that we do not respond inappropriately.

And I think that we can see when it's described like this, when we observe Manoah relating to God this way, we can see it's not appropriate, but what about it in our own lives?

Brothers and sisters the good news is that if we are responding to God in this way, God won't stop interacting with us, and he won't encourage these kinds of responses from us, but He will set us straight.

The angel of the Lord refuses to give Manoah what he's after, but he doesn't just leave either. Instead, He responds to Manoah's inappropriate behavior with answers that correct and guide Manoah and his wife to eventually respond appropriately, and they offer a sacrifice to the LORD.

And then everything becomes clear to them, they realize who they have been speaking with and they realize that God's initiative in their lives isn't something to be controlled, or used

for selfish gain, but that God had a plan and they were going to play a part in it – the fact that they had faced the Angel of the Lord and lived to tell about it proved that much.

So, brothers and sisters – as a minister, as your minister - my greatest desire for you is that you also would encounter Yahweh the Living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And while God has sent angels in the past to tell people what their role is to be in his plan to save this world, today he reveals Himself to us in a different way - as Hebrews 1:1 says *"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son"*

And I am praying that you would encounter the Living God in His Son Jesus Christ because we too are stuck in a cycle of sin, consequences, repentance and repeat.

We too are spiritually barren and unwilling to break ourselves out of that cycle – and if we have tried... well we know all too

well that we are unable to break ourselves out. And we can settle into a laziness, a slothfulness, an acceptance that this is just the way it is in our lives – but God does not intend that for those whom He has chosen – He does not intend that for us!

And when we encounter Jesus – through the testimony of those who know Him, through the preaching and explanation of the gospel, through reading the scriptures, through participating in worshipping Him at church... God takes the initiative and begins to birth faith in our hearts!

And even if we are suspicious about Jesus at first... if we think it's good to know someone like Jesus when we need help... or if Jesus seems like he would take your side and support your cause – thank God, Jesus will patiently correct us so that we will eventually come to see Him as God Incarnate and then we will bow before Him in recognition of that and willingly lay down our lives to serve His Kingdom and His cause – because we have encountered the Living God!

Now I can't generate this experience for you no matter how good a sermon I preach, and you can't conjure it up for all your sincerity or good intentions, there isn't anything we can do to manipulate Jesus - it is his initiative and his decision to come to us – but we can trust and have faith that He promises He will do this...

And let me not make the same mistake that Manoah's wife did as I close off this message and neglect to tell you what this is all for!

Because just like the Danites were reminded of what they had left undone every time they looked out over the Valley of Sorek, we are reminded of what has been left undone every time we look at the world around us.

This world was supposed to be a place where all of Creation, all of our creations, inventions, innovations, cultures and civilizations and what we do with our daily lives magnified, amplified and was sanctified through being offered in worship and as worship - to the Living God

And every time we look around we can see that this has been left undone. But – God’s saving work in Jesus Christ is going to change all that.

We’re not just saved from the oppression of sin – we are saved for the redemption of creation, the new Creation, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Ultimate Promised Land for ALL of the people of God who are in Jesus Christ.

Where not only will there be no more sorrow or sickness or disease or death and every tear will be wiped from our eyes, but the glory and honor of the nations and the splendor of kings – that’s us and what we do – will be brought into the presence of God to be offered to Him as worship! Amen!?

So let’s finish remembering we started, but let’s flip it around – instead allowing certain things to be reminders of what **we** have left undone... let them be reminders of what **Jesus** is going to get done.

Remember... Jesus is the author, the perfecter and finisher of our faith – and every little thing that Jesus gets done in us in this life - points ahead to the big thing – our resurrection and the New Creation – that Jesus will get done when He returns.

So brothers and sisters, whatever might be left undone in your lives this morning - may Jesus use this message this morning to get it done and set your sights on what is yet to come!

Amen – let’s pray.