

“Anonymous Woman”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Judges 13:1-24
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on August 26, 2018

Samson’ mother:
We do not know her name.
We know her as barren woman.
Manoah’s wife.
Woman to whom God appeared.
Twice.
Friend of angels.
Mother of Samson.
Miracle womb.
Bearer of God’s deliverance.

Even though we do not know her name, she is the main character in the thirteenth chapter of Judges. It is rather unusual to find an unnamed protagonist in the Bible. Even women are named when they play prominent roles in the narrative, but not her.

Though we do not know her name, she is portrayed as the spiritually attune one—the angel appears to her first, after all—while her husband, Manoah, comes across as a bit dense. After she tells her husband about the encounter, Manoah promptly prays, asking for the man of God to come again to “teach us what to do concerning the boy,” even though the angel’s instructions to the woman were more than clear. Manoah, it appears, needs to hear it for himself.

The text says God listened to Manoah’s prayer, but God must have a sense of humor because God sends the angel again but again he appears only to the woman when she is out by herself in a field. The text is explicit: “Manoah was not with her.” So she has to run and get him and bring him into the scene. Manoah asks the man of God, “Now when your words come true, what is to be the boy’s rule of life; what is he to do?” The man replies, “Let the woman give heed to all that I said to her,” as if to say, “Dude, I already told your wife.” He continues, repeating portions of his original speech, “*She* may not eat of anything that comes from the vine. *She* is not to drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. *She* is to observe everything that I commanded her.” There are no instructions for Manoah. The angel’s business is with her.

Perhaps desperate to do something, Manoah offers the man of God a meal, not knowing he is an angel, and he declines it. Next, maybe in an effort to nail down this guy’s identity, Manoah asks, “What is your name, so that we may honor you when your words come true?”

This, of course, is the exact same question the reader has for Manoah’s wife. “What is your name, that we may honor you?” But the narrator gives us no answer. The angel, likewise, gives no answer. Or, rather, the angel simply says, “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.”

Next Manoah makes a sacrifice to the Lord, as the text says, an offering “to him who works (or is working) wonders,” and as a flame travels up from the altar, the angel ascends toward heaven in the flame while Manoah and his wife watch, falling to the ground in awe. This is the moment, according to Scripture, that Manoah realizes they have been visited by an angel. His wife, on the other hand, seems to have suspected it from the beginning, for she had reported to her husband, “A man of God came to me and his appearance was like that of an angel of God . . .”

When Manoah realizes it was angel, he panics. “We shall surely die for we have seen God!” Never mind that his wife had already seen the angel once before and is still very much alive. I would explain his reaction by saying that men are often emotional rather than rational and prone to hysteria, but that would be an unfair stereotype. This particular man may not have been the sharpest tool in the shed, but his wife reasons with him calmly, “Honey, if the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering . . . or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things.” In other words, it doesn’t make sense that God would want to give us a child and kill us too. Manoah’s wife knows the angel can be trusted and so can the God who sent him. And sure enough, she soon bears a son and named him Samson.

Samson’s name we know right away, but hers remains a mystery. Her anonymity could be symbolic of the decline of women’s status in the book of Judges—they start out heroes like Deborah or Jael but gradually become nameless and eventually brutalized like the unnamed concubine in Judges 19.

However, Samson’s mother, though unnamed, is a strong character with an important role in the story. She is also a woman who encounters God, not once, but twice, and both times the angel appears to her alone. No man needed to mediate or interpret. It is her encounter to experience, to tell about, to invite others into.

It is in light of this divine encounter that her anonymity takes on new meaning because the only other unnamed character in the story is the angel. As scholar Adele Reinhartz argues, while namelessness is not often a positive characteristic, in this particular narrative, her anonymity may serve as a literary device linking her to the angel, who also remains nameless.¹ Just as his name is too wonderful to be spoken, her name is also concealed. Like the angel, she has a connection to the divine that is sacred and unique.

Her character is perhaps all the more powerful for her namelessness not only because she reminds us of the nameless angel, but also because in her anonymity, she can remind us of anyone. Like when we explored the identity of the Ethiopian eunuch a few months ago, she too can stand in for any person facing any barrenness and representing the ripeness therein for experiencing God. In her hunger for a child, we can feel our many types of hunger. In her unexpected encounters with an angel, we can expect to find God in our hopeless realities.

She is not the only barren woman in Scripture to be visited by an angel, but she is the first barren woman an angel visits directly. Thus she is a prototype for how God interacts with barrenness. Of course, she is not the first woman to whom God makes an appearance. In that sense, she comes from the lineage of Hagar, for though Hagar had a child, she was barren and bereft in so

many other ways, a literal outcast and in danger of losing her son's life and her own. From our earliest stories, God shows up for those in need, from Hagar to Manoah's wife.

Looking forward, you could also say the Mother Mary is from this lineage, for just as the angel appeared to Manoah's wife promising a child who would deliver the people, so an angel will one day appear to Mary promising much the same, only this child will not make the same mistakes Samson will make. This child will be God in flesh, a Savior not just for the Israelites, but for the world. Unlike Samson who must use violence to save his people, Mary's boy will take violence onto himself and thus seek to deliver all people—oppressed and oppressor.

We know that things in the book of Judges are about to grow increasingly dire, but the promise of Samson's birth is this beacon of hope that points perhaps beyond the limitations of Samson himself and hints at something even greater to come.

Samson's mother—God bless her—births more than a son. She births in us an imagination for what can be, a reality that we may now see only dimly, but one day will see more clearly.

We know her as barren woman.
Manoah's wife.
Woman to whom God appeared.
Twice.
Friend of angels.
Mother of Samson.
Miracle womb.
Bearer of God's deliverance.

Beacon of hope to a sinking world.

If we knew her name, we might remember her as someone with a limited role in a chaotic and temporary deliverance. Instead we can see her as more timeless. From Hagar to Mary she is the lowly woman for whom and through whom God does great things. The one to whom God extends mercy, through whom God performs mighty deeds, the humble one God lifts up, the hungry one God fills. In her we are reminded of the Lord, who works wonders, is working wonders, the God who has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised . . .ⁱⁱ

In her we find ourselves remembered by God, attended to by God, visited by God. In her we find we are not forgotten but known and seen. In her we are reminded that God notices those who suffer and God remembers them. Through her, we have hope. Through her we are invited into our own experience of the divine. Through her we see ourselves, not as auxiliary characters in God's unfolding work, but as crucial and beloved partners through whom God can birth miracles. For even when we feel anonymous, God knows us by name, calls us, moves us, remembers us, sends us. Like her, may we be open to surprise visits from God and unexpected adventures in God's grace. Amen.

ⁱ Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 1992.

ⁱⁱ Mary's Magnificat, Luke 1:4-55