

Ps 121:1,4
Hy 1A
Ps 78:2,3,4
Ps 127:3
Ps 112:1; Hy 15:3
Genesis 1:26-28; 3:6-16
1 Timothy 2:8-3:16
Lord's Day 14

Yarrow, February 7, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In Lord's Day 14 the church makes confession about the holy conception and birth of Jesus Christ. We do that in a time when the rate of births in Canada is lower than the rate of deaths, so that we need to bring people into our land in order to sustain our population levels (let alone make it grow). The trend of the land to decrease the size of the family as well as delay the birth of children affects the nation's Christians as well; among the people of God the size of the family has shrunk too in the last few decades even as efforts to delay the arrival of children have grown. Had God done the same with Jesus Christ....

Scripture and experience make clear that child-bearing and child-raising are painful activities. Yet the Scripture would have us know that, because of God's gift in His Son Jesus Christ, there is no task more central in God's kingdom and no task more privileged for undeserving sinners than to be parents of God's covenant children. This is the good news that comes with the birth of Jesus Christ.

I summarise the sermon this afternoon with this theme:

JESUS' BIRTH ASSURES SINNERS OF THE PRIVILEGE OF HAVING CHILDREN.

1. The mandate to multiply
2. The gospel of Jesus' birth
3. The purpose of the family

1. The mandate to multiply

How, congregation, did the first man come into the world? Genesis 2 tells us the answer: the Lord God sovereignly fashioned him from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And the first woman? Again, Genesis 2 makes clear that the Lord God took a rib from the man and from that rib fashioned a woman. In both cases the Creator worked without the assistance of man – the first time because there was yet no man, the second time because the man was caught in a deep sleep.

How did the third human being come into the world? Genesis 4: "Adam lay with his wife Eve and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain" (vs 1). Not, we need to understand, that this time God was excluded from the arrival of the newest human inhabitant of planet Earth; the Lord brought the third human being into existence through Adam's embrace of his wife Eve and so the coming together of sperm and egg in Eve's womb. God placed the fourth human on Earth in the same way as the third, and that's true of every one thereafter.

The question now arises why the Lord God brought all subsequent people onto earth in this manner. Why did He not stay with the manner in which He brought the first two people onto earth? He was mighty, we need to understand, to have fashioned more men in the course of the years from the dust of the earth, and then create more women for them from their ribs. That He did not do so makes the question "Why" the more pressing.

Let it be clear that the arrival of more people by means of childbirth is *not* the result of the fall into sin. Yes, God had said after the fall that He would greatly increase the woman's pain in childbearing (Genesis 3:16), but that promise does not mean that childbearing itself is a result of sin. On the contrary, having children is *the very first command the Lord God gave to the human race*.

Think back to Genesis 1. After He had created animals on the earth on the sixth day of creation, the Lord God determined within Himself to "make man in our image, in our likeness" with the mandate and purpose to "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth..." (Genesis 1:26). God accordingly fashioned mankind on the sixth day in His own image; "male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). After He had fashioned the man from the dust of the earth and the woman from his side (see Genesis 2 for detail), He addressed the human race He had formed as follows: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28).

Notice: the command to "be fruitful and increase in number" is the first command sovereign God gave to the newly formed creature man. The reason why he was to "be fruitful and increase in number" was so that he could "rule over" all God's world. The world God made was simply too big for the two people of Paradise, Adam and Eve, to govern all by themselves. More generations of people were required to rule thoroughly over God's world, and so be God's image-bearers throughout God's vast domain.

Given that people were to "rule", it is not surprising to note that God used mankind's *status as responsible agents* to bring about growth in the human race. Face it: God was able to make Eve conceive seed without an active sense of responsibility; that, after all, is how the animals of the field multiply. But people are different; since God created people to rule, man and woman need to *make a decision* in response to God's command to be fruitful and increase in number. The decision is ultimately whether they will *obey* that command to bring forth children. *Through their obedience* God would increase the human population of His world.

This reality from Genesis 1 has specific consequences for us today. Nowhere in Scripture has the Lord said that His first command to the human race is no longer in force. It is true that today people are saying that the earth has too many people. In the face of recent talk about climate change, the answer of the world's doomsayers was that we need to shrink earth's population; the earth, it was said, cannot sustain a population of 6 billion people. Hence the cry for a universal one child policy. Despite the loss of credibility on the part of the global warming people, the drive for limiting child birth remains; witness the fact that the United States alone, of all the countries of the western world, has a birth rate higher than its death rate. That reality confronts us with a decision: will we deliberately limit the size of our families, or do we take God's command of the beginning to "be fruitful and increase in number" seriously? This is a *decision* each of us needs to make.

And please: do not say that the earth is too full and cannot support more people. Recall that the Scripture repeatedly says that God blesses obedience. The question is not whether earth can support a growing population; the question is whether earth's inhabitants dare to trust the Creator, dare to be fruitful and increase in number in the face of today's challenges.

But we all know that having children can, very literally, be a pain. After the fall into sin God addressed the woman, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children" (Genesis 3:16). Whereas before the fall Eve would have brought more people into God's world without pain, now her obedience to God's command would include much pain. The pain would not be simply in the hours of childbirth itself, but also in the months that precede childbirth (one can think of morning sickness and tiredness) as well as in the years that follow after childbirth (one can think of the struggle sinful parents experience in raising sinful children and the tears they often shed on account of the pain of parenting).

That pain is not surprising. The parents who bring forth children are both sinful, and the children they bring forth are all sinful too. Inherent in sinfulness is a powerful sense of selfishness and of pride, and so the deep-seated conviction that *you need to respect my wishes*. When sinful parents and sinful children live together, there invariably are clashes – and tears as 'my way' clashes with 'your way'. Every parent and every child experiences something of this in the course of the years.

It's not surprising in turn that this curse of God on the fall into sin has its consequences in our society. There are numerous Canadians who feel that the burden of parenting is simply too great. Children are a nuisance, a pain, for they get in the way of one's career, they cost too much money, they destroy too many good nights' sleep, they get between father and mother, they take away your freedom to do what you like, and the list goes on. Beside the argument of overpopulation, this is another reason why many delay having children or perhaps decide to have no children at all.

But that's not how God has left the matter! That brings us to our second point:

2. The gospel of Jesus' birth

The Lord had told Eve that He would increase her pains in childbearing. But notice: before He spoke of pain He had spoken of a Saviour. In the hearing of the man and his wife, God told the serpent that He would "put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel" (Genesis 3:15). This promise, we understand, related to the coming of Jesus Christ as Victor over sin and Satan.

We need now to notice that the Seed who would crush Satan would be the seed of the *woman* – and not the seed of the man. The reason for it to be so is fundamentally important for our families today. The Lord God had originally made the man by himself, and then told the man alone to work the Garden and care for it (Genesis 2:7,15), and He told the man alone not to eat from the tree in the middle of the Garden ((Genesis 2:17). Thereafter He fashioned a "helper" for the man (Genesis 2:18), a helper for whom the man was responsible. Then it's true that the serpent came to man's helper with his beguiling temptation, and the result was that the woman took from the forbidden tree and ate its fruit – and then gave some to the man also. But the thing is that the man was "with her" (Genesis 3:6), and instead of his forbidding her from listening to the serpent he let her eat and ate also. As leader in the relationship, the buck stopped with Adam; he was responsible for his wife's conduct. It's because he failed to be the husband and leader God wanted him to be that the male half of the human race was excluded from direct involvement in bringing forth the Saviour. Hence the promise of Genesis 3:15: the one to crush the devil would be the seed of the *woman*.

That is how it happened in the fullness of time. Many generations after the fall of Genesis 3, a virgin gave birth to a Son – a *virgin*, lest we think that a man was involved. The angel Gabriel made plain to Mary how this remarkable pregnancy was possible; "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Remarkable. God had the power to make man from the dust of the earth, and create a woman from His side. He had the power too to parachute His Son into human society as a full grown man riding a charger to His battle with the devil (cf Genesis 18:1,2). He chose neither of those options. Instead, when He sent His Son into the world He had Him appear on this planet as any other person enters life on earth – He had Him *born*, born into a *normal sinful home* where parenting was as painful as in any other home. The question now is: why did God send His eternal and only Son to earth *through a pregnancy and birth*?

The reason, congregation, is simple and yet profound in its consequences for us. God had made plain to Adam in Paradise that he was to obey his Maker in all he did; he was, after all, to image to all creation what God was like. God added: the wages of sin is death (Genesis 2:17; cf Romans 6:23). With the fall into sin not just two individuals disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit, but *the two who were initially told to be fruitful and increase in number* disobeyed God. In them, then, the entire human race rebelled against their Maker. Make no mistake: God was mighty to bring more people on earth through creating more men and women in the same way He fashioned Adam and Eve – but then the human race would have been so many million disconnected individuals. No, God ordained that more people would come on earth through childbirth – and that's to say that the human race is one family. The actions of the parents, in this case Adam and Eve, would impact their children greatly. So their disobedience was not the disobedience of two individuals, but the disobedience of the human race. That's why in turn the heavy hand of God's judgment could not come only on those first two sinners, but spilled over on the sinners they brought forth as well. Hence God's word to Eve that she would bring forth children in pain was not limited to Eve but would characterize every mother's burden throughout history.

But that also means that any Deliverer from God's righteous judgment must be of the same human race that sinned. For God to make a new human body in which His Son might come to earth was to make Jesus Christ a human of different stock than every other human on the face of the earth. So too, if God were to parachute His Son into the human race as an adult, He would be a different sort of human than anyone else. The human race is one family, growing through parents giving birth to a new generation of humans. To be truly human (and so to pay for sin) the Son of God had to come into the world in the same way as every other human does. Hence the happy news of Scripture: "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), flesh like we are, and He did so through a woman bearing a child. Because Mary by God's mighty work could give birth to the Son of God, this holy Child was fully one of us, no different from any other child (Hebrews 2:17). He needed to be fed and changed and bathed as any other child, needed to go to school to learn as any other child, struggled with teething as well as teasing as any other child, etc, etc. More, the pain that belongs to growing up in a sinful home under the care of sinful parents was very much the pain of His life too (cf Luke 2:41ff). He saw with His own eyes and experienced profoundly that His mother and father struggled and hurt and cried to be for Him the parents they needed to be (Luke 2:48) – and that's to say that He knew very well that the curse of Genesis 3:16 – "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing" – was true for His parents as well in relation to Him. In the words of Lord's Day 14: "He was also the true seed of David, and like His brothers in every respect."

This Seed of the woman, who knew so well the anguish of the home, went to the cross to atone for sin. On the cross He battled the seed of the serpent, and crushed him; He conquered sin and Satan, and reconciled sinners to God. The blessed result, says Paul to the Romans, is that God's children have "peace with God" (Romans 5:1), and the result of that glorious gospel is, Paul continues, that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1).

Hear that well, beloved! So many sisters in our midst experience pregnancy as difficult (think of morning sickness and tiredness), and certainly experience the labour itself as difficult and painful. (And that's to say nothing of the difficulties of menopause.) That agony on the woman's part does not leave their husbands cold; so many brothers in the congregation also experience pregnancy as difficult. On top of that every conscientious parent experiences sorrow and tears as they seek to raise their child in the way of the Lord. Especially when the going is rough and the pain acute it is easy to convince oneself that childbearing and childrearing is simply too taxing.... Then the temptation is attractive to make us of the technology available in our time to guarantee that we don't have to go through it again....

But Paul says: because of the work of Jesus Christ "there is *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" Though God had spoken in Genesis 3 of pain in childbearing as His curse on the disobedience of Paradise, the apostle can say in Romans 8 that the victory of Mary's Child on the cross has *taken away all condemnation* for the people of God. Then the pain remains, but no longer is the pain of childbearing (or childrearing) expression of God's judgment on sin. All the sin with which I was born, and all the sin that marks my self and my home and my family is covered –says Lord's Day 14– with the innocence and perfect holiness of the Christ born to the virgin Mary. "No condemnation": how wonderfully rich!

That has a consequence in turn, and that's our third point:

3. The purpose of the family

Pregnancy and birth remain uncomfortable experiences, and raising children remains a challenge requiring so much self-denial. But because of the redeeming work of the Seed of the woman, God could tell Abraham that he would be a blessing to the nations through the children God would grant (Genesis 12:1ff). More, the children God would give to Abraham would be *His* children-by-covenant – and Abraham (head of the family as God ordained him to be) would with Sarah his wife receive the privileged responsibility of teaching one of God's little ones to know his Father in heaven. The privilege of parenting God's little ones would far outshine the pain that would come with pregnancy and birth and raising them – and that's why the psalmist can speak so forcefully of the delightful blessing that children are. "Sons are a heritage from the LORD," says Solomon in Ps 127, "children a reward from Him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them" (vss 3ff).

It's a theme the apostle Paul picks up in his letter to Timothy. To the man befalls the task to be leader, and so Timothy must instruct the men of his congregation in Ephesus to give themselves to prayer (vs 8) "for kings and all those in authority" (vs 2). After all, prayer is powerful to get things done also in society as a whole. What, meanwhile, were the women to do? Says Paul in vs 9: "I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds...." We find it an intriguing contrast; while men are to devote themselves to prayer, women are to devote themselves (not to outer beauty) but to "good deeds". But the prayer of the men and the good deeds of the women are of one piece, for prayer and work come together. While the men, says Paul, give themselves to prayer-for-others, the women are to give themselves to work-for-others. In a word: they are to follow their husbands' prayers with their deeds. That in turn is also why Paul can add in vs 11 that a woman is to learn in quietness and in full submission, and is not to teach or have authority over a man. The man is the leader and the woman his helper – and that's to come out not just in church and family, but in all society.

Now, what are the good deeds the woman is to give herself to? Paul mentions one of them in vs 15, where he writes, "But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love

and holiness with propriety.” Paul’s point is *not* to say that those who bear children will go to heaven. That simply can’t be Paul’s meaning since he just wrote in 2:5 that “there is one ... mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all,” and that includes all women. But now that one is saved, now that one is reconciled to the God against whom we rebelled in the beginning, what does *gratitude* look like? Gratitude, of course, *looks like obedience*. And the very first command God had ever spoken to the human race was the instruction to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). The woman of faith knows that God has never revoked that command, and she believes too that the curse pronounced in Genesis 3 about the pain of childbearing is lifted in Jesus Christ so that the way is open to obey the command of Genesis 1 without hesitation. So the Christian woman sees childbearing and childrearing as a privilege, and gives herself to that task humbly and obediently.

Does that sideline her from real life, and entrap her in the narrow confines of the family kitchen? Our society says Yes, and so our girls are told not to let families get in the way of a good career. But notice, congregation, what subject Paul mentions directly on the heels of his instruction about women and childbearing. He speaks next about overseers, more, about how those who set their heart on being an overseer desire a noble task (1 Timothy 3:1). Then he mentions the qualifications that men of the congregation must have in order to become an elder or a deacon – and we understand that elders and deacons have leadership roles in the congregation and so indirectly in the community. Now, where does a lad learn to desire a leadership role? More, where is a lad trained to have the qualities that make for good leadership? That is specifically the home, where the mother plays such a vital role!

Look at it this way. In 20, 30, 40 years time the church will still need capable and God-fearing leaders in the offices of elder and deacon (to say nothing of minister of the Word). Where will these leaders come from? They need today to be conceived, born and raised! Childbearing today is church-building tomorrow! The principle is true for the wider community and the nation as a whole as well. If today women will not answer in obedience God’s command to be fruitful and increase in number, the obvious consequence is that tomorrow there are no leaders for the land. The contours of that development are clearly apparent in our land already.

What a privileged task, then, the Lord gives to women! The woman was created to be a helper to the man, and it pleases the Lord God to use the woman to bring forth tomorrow’s leaders – be it for families, for church, for the nation as a whole. Talk about having influence!

So I come back to the young people of the congregation. We well understand that they need to prepare themselves today for the challenges of tomorrow. Above anything else, Christian young people will want to prepare themselves today for *service in God’s kingdom* in their adult years. Then these young people will need to take seriously that very first command God gave to the human race, a command He never revoked; through bringing forth children any given generation should place on earth more persons able to image God and so care for God’s world as He would do it. So Christian young men and Christian young women need to prepare themselves today for the wonderful task of parenting; boys need to learn to be husbands and fathers, leaders in home, church and society, while girls need to train themselves to be wives and mothers, helpers to their men in home, church and society. And it’s in the home first of all, through the godly instruction they receive from father and mother, that boys and girls learn to be men and women in God’s world, husbands and wives focused on God’s service, and so fathers and mothers of the next generation of God’s image-bearers on planet Earth. So Paul can even tell young widows to marry again, “to have children, to manage their homes” (1 Timothy 5:14). And in

another place he can add that older women need to “train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home...” (Titus 2:4).

The Lord, congregation, took the long view in Genesis 3, when He announced the victory of the Seed of the woman over the seed of the serpent. As we plan our careers and futures, and mould our children for their careers and futures, we need equally to take the long view. You and I are busy today not just with the cares and needs of 2010, but we're ultimately busy with the cares and needs of family and church and society one, two, four generations away. Those generations need fathers and mothers, and because Christ was born of the virgin Mary *we may have a central role to play in forming those coming generations.*

There is no greater privilege in God's kingdom today than to raise the next generation of God's little ones to know their God – and prepare them to tell the subsequent generation!