

Today's Gospel is unusual in that it features two women... two pregnant women... two women who have no reasonable expectation of being pregnant.

Mary, a virgin, 13 to 15 years of age or so, is pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of God creating life in her womb.

Elizabeth is somewhere in her 60s or 70s or 80s, in all her years she has never been able to have children and is past child-bearing capability. Yet she and her husband, Zechariah, also of advanced years, conceived John the Baptist, the baby in her belly.

It's a miracle that either of these women is pregnant. Based on Luke's account, and the Canticle of Mary in particular, I think it's safe to say, Mary and Elizabeth are both pretty thrilled to be the chosen miracle mothers.

Many of us in this room are parents, many mothers. I gave birth to my son in 2012. My husband and I knew we were blessed to have him.

But it was with some surprise and a little concern that I found myself pregnant again less than a year later... We wanted children close in age. It was just a bit closer than we'd anticipated.

It was in my second trimester that we attended a routine ultrasound. As with my first pregnancy, I felt great. The ultrasound technician held the probe to my still-trim tummy. The baby looked small to me... and didn't seem to "float" so much as "sink". Then the technician turned to me and said "I'm sorry, I can't find a heartbeat". There was no heartbeat where there had been one before. My baby had died. My body had betrayed no signs of the loss. The child we had not planned, would not be.

As you can imagine, this was a difficult time for my husband and me emotionally. Still seeking to have children close in age, my husband and I began “trying” as it is now euphemistically called. Months of waiting and another miscarriage later, we started to get concerned.

Conceiving a child is a scientific matter these days. Drug store tests can pinpoint ovulation to the day. Nothing is haphazard. So when no baby found its way to my belly after a number of months, my doctor quickly referred me to a fertility clinic. The clinic doctors ran my husband and I through a flurry of tests. Each one had to take place on the right day within a 30 day timeframe. Blood work, ultrasounds, lab tests – they were all scheduled with great precision. And at the end of it all, a medical expert used the dreaded “f” word. I had a fertility disorder. From a reproductive standpoint, I was, I am, in my forties not my thirties. There just aren’t many viable eggs left.

“Keep trying...” said the doctor, “it isn’t totally impossible, just very unlikely.”

The first thought of women who experience miscarriage or infertility is: what did I do wrong? Women experience tremendous guilt, shame and sorrow when faced with reproductive limitations. It’s not something we get to plan for, we don’t know we have a problem until we’re faced with it and the consequences for our lives are significant, we feel like failures and we’re also tremendously sad about the child we will never know.

I prayed in these pews for God to send me another baby.

Imagine how Elizabeth must have felt. In a society where a woman’s primary goal was reproduction, she was a total failure. Barren, unproductive, unfruitful, infertile...

How she must have prayed to have a child...

In announcing John's birth, the Angel Gabriel told Zechariah that the child would be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, would turn many children of Israel to the Lord their God, would turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord.

But is that what Elizabeth was praying for? A prophet? A blessing, to be sure but after she conceived, Luke's Gospel indicates Elizabeth said, "so has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others." She was thrilled to not be barren anymore, to have the simple blessing of a child.

These days, parents turn to the medical community, alternative therapies, surrogacy and adoption to create families. Families look more diverse, but the love they create is incomparable to any other relationship. Both the extreme sadness at the difficulty creating a family and the tremendous efforts made by parents-to-be to overcome the problem drive home a singular message for me: our children are a blessing. They are gifts from God.

Children make us want to tear our hair out from time to time (or everyday, when they refuse to put on their boots, eat the meal they loved yesterday or remember to clear their own dishes after eating), but parents still can't imagine our lives without them. They help us believe in the possibility offered by the future, they force us to connect with our inner child, they often bring out the best in us and play a role in helping us grow spiritually and emotionally.

After we've created the family we long for, miracle mothers take shape in other ways too: by trying to help our children overcome the extreme challenges they sometimes face.

Over the last month, there are 2 stories that have driven home how clearly mothers see their children as gifts. The first is the story of Kate Drury, her family and her mother, Julie. Julie is a devoted mother to two children. Her life shifted in a momentous way when her daughter, Kate, began showing signs of medical distress as an infant and continued to be medically fragile as a child. I followed their story through Julie's blog and Facebook updates. Her updates often detailed Kate's emergency episodes landing them at CHEO. Between being a caregiver for her daughter and trying to keep up with being a present parent for her son, Julie stretched herself incredibly thin. Last year, Kate spent over 200 days (consecutively) in hospital trying to overcome mitochondrial disease. I didn't know her, but it's obvious Kate made a huge impression on everyone she met. She is always described by her giggles. Sadly, Kate returned home in late November of this year, just in time to see her Christmas tree and spend some time with her family before passing away at the age of 8 years old. Julie and her family are devastated and yet, Julie's Facebook post about Kate's death focused on how Kate was an incredible light in this world, had touched so many with her smiles and spirit and how honoured and proud Julie was to be Kate's mom. Julie's life has been gut wrenchingly difficult over the last few years, but she knows Kate's life was a gift and she was privileged to be her mother.

You may also know of the story of Evan Leversage. He inspired the entire town of St. George, Ontario to celebrate Christmas on October 24<sup>th</sup> knowing that Evan, who was battling brain cancer, would likely not make it until December 25<sup>th</sup>. Carollers, lights, festivities, all took part after Evan's mother requested that a few neighbours put up their Christmas lights early so that Evan could see them one last time. Evan took his last breath, held by his

mother, on December 6. Not only Evan's mother, but the entire town of St. George treated this child as a gift from God by lighting up their town for his moment of happiness – knowing how important it was – fleeting as it may have been.

And what of the mothers who are currently fleeing Syria as refugees? They are packing up their babies and climbing into boats to traverse traitorous waters. They are walking marathons with the weight of their children on their backs and their children's future on their shoulders. When those mothers find a new country, perhaps here in Canada, despite the cold, what kind of song do you think their hearts are singing?

And what of the mothers in Southern India – whose homes were flooded when rivers burst their banks after heavy downpours? Climate change has them swimming to keep their children above water. They have left every belonging they have, they cling only to their children. Their most precious gift.

After my fertility diagnosis, I spent a lot of time on prayer. I also launched myself headfirst into every alternative therapy that was available. And I'm one of the lucky ones. My daughter was born three months ago. I have the same love for both my children, but the moment my daughter was born I knew I was a miracle mother too. This child, both my children, are gifts from God. I feel a kinship with Elizabeth and Mary.

Every day I look at my daughter and say "I'm so glad you're here. Thank God you're here." The mothers of Kate and Evan can testify to how much those children, even in their fragility, were incredible gifts in their lives. I feel a kinship with these women.

And to the mothers fleeing Syria and swimming in India, I feel a kinship with you too. I know you are miracle mothers whether or not you struggled to have your children come into this world,

you're struggling to keep them safe here. You're their superheroes. And this community, as it looks at its Christmas tree for the first or the 30<sup>th</sup> or the last time, needs to treat you like miracle mothers, and your children like gifts from God.

And we can all sing a version of Mary's song. Though we may not bear the Christ child in our wombs, we are oh so blessed to have the gifts of our children:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exalts in God my saviour. For he has looked with mercy on my lowliness and my name will be forever exalted. For the mighty God has done great things for me, and his mercy will be from age to age. And Holy Holy Holy is his name.