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The annunciation of the birth of Samson. We have the mind of Christ.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Judges 13. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, Behold, you are barren and have not born children, but you shall conceive and bear a son.

Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean. For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

Then the woman came and told her husband, A man of God came to me, and his

appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name. But he said to me, Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son.

So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean. For the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death. Then Manoah prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, please let the man of God whom you sent come again to us and teach us what we are to do with the child who will be born.

And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field. But Manoah her husband was not with her. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me.

And Manoah arose and went after his wife and came to the man and said to him, Are you the man who spoke to this woman? And he said, I am. And Manoah said, Now when your words come true, what is to be the child's manner of life, and what is his mission? And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, Of all that I said to the woman, let her be careful. She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing.

All that I commanded her, let her observe. Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, Please let us detain you and prepare a young goat for you. And the angel of the Lord said to Manoah, If you detain me, I will not eat of your food.

But if you prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord. For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord. And Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, What is your name, so that when your words come true, we may honor you? And the angel of the Lord said to him, Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful? So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to the one who works wonders.

And Manoah and his wife were watching. And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground.

The angel of the Lord appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord. And Manoah said to his wife, We shall surely die, for we have seen God.

But his wife said to him, If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these. And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him.

And the spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahanadan, between Zorah and Eshteral. In Judges chapter 13 we see Israel under the oppression of the Philistines, except that the Philistines don't seem to be especially oppressive. The people don't cry out.

There seems to be intermarriage, as we see in the following chapter. As oppressors go, the Philistines are fairly civilized and tolerant, and keeping their head down under Philistine rule seems a much better option than starting any sort of rebellion. However, God is going to shake things up through Samson.

He's going to cause Samson to be an annoyance not just to the Philistines, but also to many in Israel. When Samson actually goes about causing trouble for the Philistines, the Judahites complain and try to hand him over to them. The situation here is a bad situation where there is little enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, so God has to raise up a troublemaker to introduce a bit of much needed enmity and antagonism.

They are given over to the Philistines for forty years. Perhaps we are to see the events of this chapter as occurring near the beginning of that period, in preparation for deliverance later on down the line. God's works of deliverance are often a great many years in the making.

This is an annunciation and birth story. It's the only one of its kind in the Book of Judges. There are various birth stories in the Book of Genesis and also some annunciations for the birth of Ishmael and Isaac.

In the Book of Samuel that comes after this, there's a birth story in the case of Samuel's birth to Hannah. The most famous birth story in the Old Testament is that of Moses. In the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke begins with two birth stories, with John the Baptist and with Jesus, both of which have an annunciation, with the angel Gabriel bringing news of the birth.

Here it is the angel of the Lord, which I believe should be understood to be the second person of the Trinity, and also to be the commander of the army of God. The Lord is going to start a fight against the Philistines, and the angel of the Lord, the commander of God's hosts, comes in order to announce the birth of one who will lead this fight. Manoah's wife, Samson's mother, is barren.

She is told that she will have a son, and that her son should be a Nazarite. The other two lifelong Nazarites in Scripture, John the Baptist and Samuel, were born to mothers who were barren. The law of the Nazarite is given in Numbers chapter 6. In Numbers 6 verses 1 to 8 we read, And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazarite, to separate himself to the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink.

He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink, and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall touch his head, until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the Lord, he shall be holy.

He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long. All the days that he separates himself to the Lord he shall not go near a dead body, not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister if they die shall he make himself unclean, because his separation to God is on his head. All the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord.

As a Nazarite, the child of Manoah's wife would be a lifelong dedicated servant of the Lord. He would have to avoid wine, like the high priest he would have to avoid death. He would be a dedicated warrior.

His head is consecrated, with the hair upon it belonging to the Lord, and the crown of hair upon his head will have to go to the Lord. Manoah and his wife, the father and mother of Samson, live in the land of the Danites, but the initial land, before they moved. No name is given for Manoah's wife, which is interesting, she's the woman, and as the woman she highlights for us the importance of women in the story of Samson.

Samson's life is defined by his relationship with women, for good and ill, and mostly for ill. Like the patriarch's wife, she struggles in conceiving, and the angel comes to her when she is alone. Manoah is not involved, he can't take credit for what happens.

The woman then tells her husband Manoah, and he prays for a second visit of the man of God. And the man of God visits again, the angel of the Lord. This time, once again, he appears to the wife of Manoah when she is alone, and then she has to summon her husband.

Even though the angel of the Lord comes again, in answer to the request of Manoah, Manoah's part in the whole situation is downplayed. The Lord is going to achieve this by his power, not by the power of Manoah. And when the angel of the Lord delivers his instructions to Manoah, it's mostly just to reiterate what he has already told the woman.

One might imagine Manoah feeling a little frustrated. Manoah offers the angel of the Lord some hospitality, not realising that it is the angel of the Lord. And the angel of the Lord refuses, but accepts an offering to the Lord.

This reminds us, I think, of the story of Gideon as well, where the angel of the Lord receives an offering. However, while there was a peace offering there, there is no peace offering of the same kind here. There's a whole burnt offering, and the angel of the Lord ascends in the smoke of the burnt offering to the Lord.

At this point, Manoah is afraid, and his wife has to speak some sense into him. Manoah

fears that God is going to destroy them, since they've seen the Lord. Manoah's wife explains that, if God did want to destroy them, he would not have accepted their offering, he wouldn't have displayed such wonders to them, and he wouldn't be giving them a son.

The woman bears a son, and his name is called Samson, little son, S-U-N. As he grows, the Lord blesses him, and then the spirit of the Lord comes upon him to equip him for his work of deliverance. James Bajon observes of the Samson story that there is a symmetry to it.

He writes, It begins with Samson and Zorah in the womb of his mother, and ends with Samson back in Zorah in the tomb of his father. It begins with a grain tribute offered up to Yahweh, and ends with Samson surrounded by sacrifices in the house of Dagon, possibly the god of grain. It begins with the sacrifice of a live animal on a rock, and ends with the sacrifice of Samson under a heap of rocks, and it begins with a secret which is kept from the first woman in Samson's life, and ends with a secret which is discovered by the last woman in Samson's life.

That our text begins and ends in similar ways is not merely a literary flourish. In many ways it is reflective of the judgeship of Samson. Samson's exploits end on a rather hollow note.

It is not really clear what Samson achieves in his time as Israel's judge. He leaves Israel much as he found her, her problems unaddressed. A question to consider, why of all the judges in the book of judges is Samson the one to have an annunciation and birth narrative? And I, when I came to you brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the destiny of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not of wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.

These things God has revealed to us through the spirit, for the spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is

from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.

For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. At the end of the first chapter of 1st Corinthians, Paul wants the Corinthians to look at themselves and to consider the demographics of their group. They are not, for the most part, wise, powerful, influential, and of noble birth.

There are a few exceptions. Erastus, mentioned in Romans 16, verse 23, was the city treasurer, and Gaius, who hosted Paul and the entire church, was presumably a wealthy and influential man. However, for the most part, the Corinthians would be of little account in the eyes of their society, and yet they have been called by God.

The very choice of God revealed as they look around them at their fellow Corinthian Christians should challenge their concern for pursuing social status and honor. This choice was not accidental on God's part, but entirely purposeful. God chose the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, and the low and the despised to bring to nothing the things that are.

The result of all of this is that no one can boast in their strength, wisdom, or social status. If they have these things, God has, if anything, chosen them despite them, rather than on account of them. There was nothing in us or the Corinthians that merited God's choice.

God's choice was entirely unconditional and gracious, and it is because of God's gracious choice that we are in Christ, in whom we have graciously received a new standing. If the Corinthians wanted to look for a cause in themselves for God's choice of them, they would search in vain. However, having been chosen by God, we are in Christ Jesus.

We now belong to Him. We participate in His status and enjoy His riches. We had no wisdom to commend us.

In Christ, we have wisdom from God. We were weak, lacking in social power and influence. In Christ, we have the standing of righteousness before God, of right standing before the Father.

We were despised. In Christ, we have sanctification. We're set apart as holy people to the Lord.

We were nothing. In Christ, we have redemption. We're bought at the costliest of prices,

marked out as precious in God's sight.

We now have a standing and a status to rejoice in, but no boast to make in ourselves. The point of all of this is that when we do boast, we must boast in God alone. Paul quotes Jeremiah chapter 9 verses 23 to 24, which clearly underlies the entirety of his argument here.

Thus says the Lord, There is a carnivalesque character to the kingdom of God. The typical ways of the world are suspended and overturned. Yet while a carnival is merely a temporary suspension or inversion of the social structure, a short relief from its crushing burden or an escape valve for its pent-up energies, the Church testifies to an ultimate order that exceeds the structures of this present age, an order in which no one can boast or exalt himself over others, where the proud of this age are humbled and the poor are exalted.

Such a vision is one of the greatest treasures of the Christian Church. When the theological foundation of this vision of equality is abandoned, its remarkable social vision starts to crumble and it cannot be easily recovered. It doesn't deny the great differences between people or pretend that they don't exist.

It doesn't reduce people to sameness. However, it declares a more ultimate reality that places all such differences in a completely different value system. It levels the ground beneath our feet and makes possible radical transformations in the ways that we imagine and live in society.

The Epistle of James also raises some of these issues. James chapter 1 verses 9 to 11. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower fails and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. And then in James chapter 2 verses 5 to 7. Listen my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man.

Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? Like Paul, James challenges the value system by which many Christians still carefully seek the approval of the rich and honorable of this age, while dishonoring those who have been honored by God. Paul looks back to his first visit to the Corinthians. In his presentation of the gospel to them, he manifested something of the character of the gospel by virtue of the absence of showy rhetoric and clever philosophical displays.

His message, focused upon and foregrounded the cross, the reality at the very heart of

the gospel, the reality that punctures and overturns all proud human value systems. His own presence among them was marked by weakness, by fear and trembling. Paul wasn't a stirring charismatic and puffed up orator with words full of pride and bravado.

Rather he seemed to cut a somewhat weak and unexceptional figure. His message wasn't filled with clever philosophy, but proclaimed the cross plainly and simply, attended by signs of the Spirit's power. By his own account, Paul was no great speaker.

In 2 Corinthians 11, verse 6, he admits that he is unskilled in speaking. In 2 Corinthians 10, verse 10, for they say his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account. Christ's strength manifest in weakness is a recurring theme in Paul, most notably in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 9-10.

But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. Paul's concern here is that his philosophical acumen or eloquence never obscure or undermine the content of his message, which is about the power of God, which overturns all of the value systems of this age. Paul isn't building a movement behind himself, the great teacher, orator and thinker, but he's bringing people to Christ and his cross.

The contrast between human wisdom and divine wisdom, however, does not mean that divine wisdom is simply defined by its negation of the value structures of human wisdom and power. There is a wisdom appropriate to the gospel. Paul has already argued that we have a wisdom given to us in Christ.

And here he elaborates, this wisdom has been hidden since before the ages. It isn't a wisdom of this age, nor can it be understood by the rulers of this age. This wisdom was hidden before all ages, but also destined before all ages for our glory.

It is a glorious and a magnificent wisdom, a kingly wisdom, beyond the understanding of the supposedly glorious rulers of this age, who were brought to nothing by it. Had they understood it, they would not have crucified Christ. And Paul brings together some echoes from Isaiah to underline his point.

Isaiah chapter 64 verse 4, And in Isaiah chapter 52 verse 15, This wisdom is known and given through the Spirit. Without the Spirit, there would be no way of knowing it, for it is spiritually perceived. Yet the Spirit knows the things of God and can communicate them to his people.

Through the Spirit, we can see that God doesn't just bring to nothing the pretensions of human wisdom, but he outmatches them with a higher wisdom. And it is Paul's task to

communicate this wisdom in a manner fitting to its content and its character. The Spirit of God is at odds with the Spirit of this world, which puts its trust and boast in human power and wisdom, all of which have been brought low by God.

This is why Paul is so concerned about the downplaying of the cross, for the trappings of human wisdom, eloquence, influence and standing. The cross is the point where the wisdom of God is most clearly seen over against the wisdom of the world. Yet those who are so concerned with the way that they appear to the rich, the wise, the powerful and the influential of this age, will always feel the greatest embarrassment about the cross and seek to avoid that point.

The spiritual person, the person who has received the Spirit of God, is able to discern things that the natural person, the person who lacks the Spirit, cannot. The person who truly operates by the Spirit of God can judge all things, but cannot be judged by others. Paul concludes the chapter by quoting a version of Isaiah chapter 40 verse 13, who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel.

But he makes a crucial shift in his final statement. We have the mind of Christ. Christ here is substituted for Lord, and the mind that he speaks of is clearly connected to the Spirit.

Mind here, as in Philippians 2, means mindset or way of thinking. In Christ we have a wisdom, a way of thinking, that is given through the Spirit, and which is God's very own. Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 8 describes this.

As in Philippians 2, Paul's point here is that the mind of Christ is the mindset seen in Christ going to the cross, and any approach that would downplay the cross, and the way that it overturns the values of the world, is not the Christian gospel. A question to consider. How do you think Paul might have responded to Christians claiming some special spiritual status that exalted them above others, and some gnostic revelation that was exclusive to them? How does his own position not fall prey to this?