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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary (St. Anne's Day)
July 24, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Genesis 17:1-8; Luke 1:26-33

Saint Anne presents something of a conundrum for those of us who are obsessed with historical facts. Not much is known about her, or about her husband Joachim, and, as far as I can tell, interest in the Virgin Mary's parents arose in conjunction with the burgeoning popularity of devotion to Mary in the second century. Mary, obviously, was (and is) an important person because she bore our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thus, if we follow a certain line of logic, Saint Anne must be important, too, because she bore the Mother of Our Lord. But we have to stop somewhere, because otherwise we would be celebrating a virtually infinite retrogression of saints who were the great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, and great-great-great-grandparents of Jesus back to the origin of the human species.

Yet I would still say that the assertion, "Anne is important because Mary is important," is very unsatisfying. I believe we need to look into some of the legends that circulated in the Church's earliest days, and, while recognizing that they may not be historically accurate, still give them a fair shake and see why Saint Anne might be important in her own right.

But first, a bit of background...

The Christian Bible as we know it today did not fall out of the sky in 1611 in the King James Version. All of us can agree on this fact (hopefully). But the sixty-six books of the Bible -- eighty if you count the Apocrypha -- were deemed fit for inclusion as "scripture" in the fourth century, but, prior to

that, there were writings circulating that were eventually rejected and not included in what became the Christian Bible. Reasons for rejection would include, but not be limited to, historical inaccuracy, false teaching of the faith, and inconsistency with other writings (especially those considered more authoritative). One of these eventually rejected writings was the Gospel of James, which makes mention of the parents of the Virgin Mary.

In the Gospel of James, Anne and her husband Joachim are presented as successors of sorts to Hannah and Elkanah, the parents of Samuel in the Old Testament. Also, the name Anne is etymologically related to the name Hannah. Both were childless and therefore despondent until God heard their cries and gave them a child. Hannah gave birth to Samuel, and Anne gave birth to Mary.

This morning's First Reading reaches back even farther to the book of Genesis, recalling another childless couple -- Abraham (then "Abram") and Sarah. Included here is, of course, the promise; the Lord says to Abraham, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (Genesis 17:6). One could easily imagine this being the promise spoken to Saint Anne, whose own grandson, Jesus, was a King who came from her. What sets the saints apart from the rest, though, is not only their extraordinary faithfulness to God, but also their trust in God's promises. As Genesis, chapter 15 says, "[Abraham] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Apply this to the generations thereafter -- to Anne and to the Virgin Mary and to our Lord Jesus himself -- and you'll see just how broad and deep our heritage of trust in God is. Our forebears in the faith teach us, therefore, how to be faithful ourselves.

Today, we remember, too, our own grandparents, and especially grandmothers, as

Saint Anne was the grandmother of Jesus, Some of you may have been very fortunate like me to have known an exceedingly faithful and devout grandmother like my Grandma Helen, and, if not, I hope you had someone to assume that role regardless of relation. What we find in the Church is that the faithfulness of past generations -- including that of my Grandma Helen and countless others -- is a help and an inspiration for us in the present.

Sometimes, too, looking back at them gives us insight as to who we are and why we are the way we are...

My Grandma Helen, in addition to being exceedingly faithful and devout, had an unwavering love of travel, and, not surprisingly, driving. She loved to go places and often never went the same way twice. Both the journey and the destination were important...if not equally important. To me, that's such a beautiful image of a life lived in faith. Until we die, our lives are journeys, never destinations, because there is really only one destination -- the kingdom of heaven.

My Grandma Helen modeled that journey for me and for many others in her quiet, gentle perseverance. She rarely complained (although I don't ever recall anyone asking her for her opinion). She was a dedicated educator, faithful volunteer at church, and, most importantly, a committed disciple of her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And perhaps you, like me, keep the example of our grandparents' and other forebears' faith as a help and guide in your present journeys, but the blessings don't end there -- no, they continue on and on in the prayers and fellowship with which we're surrounded in the communion of saints. Today -- and every time we gather to break bread at the Lord's Table -- my Grandma Helen and countless faithful departed join us in what is for us a

foretaste of the feast to come and what is for them the feast that has no end. Yet the Church on earth and the hosts of heaven are one in that moment.

The prayers of the saints continue to bolster us with support and encouragement...perhaps not unlike that which you received or still receive from your grandparents. And if they, like my Grandma Helen, are now partaking in the feast that has no end, know, too, that they are cheering you on right now through both your greatest joys and your deepest hurts.

Some aspects of today's celebration, in a different vein, give us an opportunity to consider the humanity, as well as the divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ. True God and yet true man, he had human parents...and grandparents...and lived and died a real human life and death. But, again, where doubt and uncertainty threatened his mission and purpose, faithfulness to the call of his heavenly Father always prevailed. This morning's Gospel text finds Mary in a state of fear and bewilderment over what is about to happen to her, which is completely understandable in light of the fact that the angel Gabriel has just broken into her midst with the words, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28b). But the generations of faithfulness are to carry on -- from Anne, now to Mary, and then most perfectly in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gabriel makes this clear in the words that follow: "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David" (Luke 10:31-32). Without the faithful who had gone before, including the great King David, faithfulness could not have been perfected in Jesus Christ. Many before tried their best, but only

Jesus got it right, So why should there be any pressure on Jesus' parents...or grandparents for that matter?

The angel Gabriel does his best to relieve the pressure; he says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 10:30b). The weight of the world was not on Mary's shoulders, and it should go without saying that it's not on ours, either. Yes, our Lord Jesus Christ takes that weight upon himself and we are freed to persevere in the faith with the encouragement of Anne, the Virgin Mary, my Grandma Helen and countless others who, despite the challenges and fears associated with God's call to them, said, "Yes, Lord, I will follow you!"

We have a heritage of faithfulness -- both as Saint Anne's Church and as the people of God -- that will show us that no fear, uncertainty, obstacle, or even death itself can annihilate the love our Lord has for us and the faithfulness we offer him in return. Abraham, Sarah, Hannah, Anne, and the Blessed Mother were tested, challenged, and put through bitter agony...yet were consistently and unfailingly blessed by a God who always remained true to his promise.

And we will be consistently and unfailingly blessed, too.

Amen.