

# Be It unto Me

*Rebecca Clarke*

I glance at the high chair on my way to the laundry room, half hoping God will answer my petitioning prayers in that way I've mentally mocked so many times: *I envisioned a little blonde girl and so I knew we were supposed to have one more, . . .* but God continues to remain silent on the subject. I'm getting desperate to hear this particular answer; I am pushing forty.

Some say that you have to approach death to give birth, and I believe that. The dread of a misstep has been at the forefront of every birth experience for me, feeling I've had to retrieve the baby from somewhere or someone else and bring it stealthily over that precarious threshold from water to air. The four times I've given birth have all been on the operating table, with arms outstretched and tethered down, making me always think of the crucifix, the white sheet obscuring the birth from my view. Last time my heart rate dropped so low during the surgery that I wanted to ask the doctor if I was dying, but I lacked sufficient breath to speak the words. With every shallow breath I rehearsed what became a prayer in my mind: *The baby*, inhale, breathe out, *the baby*, inhale, breathe out, *the baby*.

When Mary is told by the angel that she will be a mother, she asks one question about the mechanics of it all, and then responds without any evidence of hesitation. I marvel at her unflinching willingness in the face of sacrifice, both in the certain present and unknowable future: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me, according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).

I haven't always been as willing to offer that sacrifice as Mary was. I went six years proclaiming flatly to anyone who dared ask if we would have more, "Two kids is a lot of kids." But then my youngest went to kindergarten, and my husband's quiet petitioning fell into place for me, and I prayed and eased myself back into the idea of another pregnancy and then—even eagerly—into yet another. I've been more than blessed with four babies, more than filled, more than overflowing. My husband is certainly as kind as Mary's was, for the most part leaving it to me to let him know about my plans. Who am I to ask for more?

My reasons for wanting another in the short term are flimsy—the sweet thoughts of naming, the announcement, the chubby arms, the tiny clothes, even the hospital stay that is muddled with morphine and staples-as-stitches for me. In the long-term I still want, but who can tell what it would mean? Would it upset our perfect symmetry of four, two girls and two boys? But all doubts circle me back to thinking about the parent-teacher conferences, the prolific paper-and-tape creations, and the child who makes his way to our bed in the nighttime. All fleeting things, but the things that give me joy. The desire for life in the face of death.

I sometimes picture an almost giddy God telling Adam and Eve to multiply and replenish the earth, his own most recent feats of creation having gone so very well. These babies in so many ways are the ultimate move—for a brief space in time anyway—away from entropy. That organizing and giving of life has such a stunning pull on me, even when there's no human way of knowing what giving life might mean.

A thoughtful friend explained my dilemma back to me this way, "It's like when you decide to have a child, you change the world. And the world rejoices with you. But when you decide you're done, where's the poetry in that?" Case in point: at no time in scripture does an angel come in glory to an aging woman to proclaim, "Hallelujah! Plenty enough now with the childbearing!" But some aging women are still left pondering in their hearts these absent events. I teeter between poetry and reality. Between the thought of a baby and the facts that the depths of my C-section scar never healed correctly after the second birth, that I couldn't raise my right arm for months after my third, and that nagging feeling that I might not get away with the baby so stealthily this next time. If there is to be that next go-round I ache for, I decide, I am going to need God's clear urging.



The crisp feeling comes to me in the temple, but not because I am in the temple. I count it a real answer to my prayer because it comes once I finally let go of my own agenda, once I've finally given up. My extended family and I are in the celestial room hugging my soon-to-be-missionary niece, and I whisper to Sam that it's okay for us to try again. I step aside from the group, bow my head, and bargain with God in a way that makes me feel certain that whatever happens will be his will: we'll try for two months and then let wisdom put a stop to things; after all, I am now forty-one.

I hold hands with Sam one evening four weeks later, walking up the street so we can have the quiet our full little home doesn't often provide. It's simpler and sweeter to tell him this time, this way: no gifts of baby clothes, no wrapped positive pregnancy test or other preplanned announcement. "You are?" He's elated. We stand at the edge of the road and hug, and I cry. Maybe we can use the name I've saved and savored for so long: Hazel, and June after my mom's middle name. We'll set the crib up. We'll get the car seat down. The plans start to fall into place, and we turn and head for home.

The next morning I assess my maternity clothes situation and start quietly mapping out dates. We'll be on our long-anticipated trip to Paris at twelve weeks. We'll tell the kids then, which will blunt the sharp edges of the announcement for fourteen-year-old Eliza. No one else will need cajoling. Six-year-old Owen has inexplicably written on his summer fun list, "Have a new baby." Emme is twelve, the perfect nurturing age, and Christian is three and fascinated with anything that can move on its own. I figure out the date of the C-section, a magical and rhythmic 11/12/13. I submit my request to take fall semester off from teaching.

One Sunday at the beginning of sacrament meeting I have a moment's hesitation when we sit behind a young new mother (all new mothers are so very young—how did I miss it before?) holding her baby. My back is so stiff I can't even bend down to pick up the fruit snack wrapper dropped by my three-year-old. Why am I asking my body to do all of this again? This flash of fear actually takes my breath away. Then during the sacrament I receive one of the clearest answers I have ever felt, and it comes in words: "This pregnancy for you? This is nothing but a blessing."

Six weeks later I end my morning writing class early. As I drive to the hospital for a blood test per the nurse's instructions, I wonder as I cramp whether this is a moment that won't need to be remembered, or

if it's something that will stay forever frozen in my mind. I know the numbers aren't on my side—my age, my C-sections—and I start a different repetitive prayer: *Please*. Sam meets me at the hospital, and things look blessedly fine. Spotting is normal. I head home and lie down, even though the nurse says that lying down won't change things. But in my heart it will. By that afternoon, though, I can't really call the spotting just spotting any longer, and I call my mom to tell her that I was expecting her thirteenth grandchild in 2013 and that it will likely not be born after all. She brings me soup and bread, and rubs my feet while I lie on my bed, holding still, still, still, all the while willing this to turn out the way I have envisioned and becoming more deeply amazed than I've ever been that this has turned out so flawlessly for us four times in a row.

The next morning tears slick down my cheeks as I roll up my sleeve for another blood test. The nurse looks at me kindly and explains that he is good at this—I needn't be so worried. I almost laugh, and then bungle out an explanation that I don't want the finality this test will provide. I look away from the needle and think about the fact that babies' cells can remain in their mothers' bodies even into old age, and I turn back to watch the slim vial fill with deep red. I wonder if my baby's cells are in that mix. I think about the fact that those cells have been found to heal mothers' damaged hearts. That drive home I don't remember. Except I know that I did not pray, because I did not pray for days.

It's been months now. The date we would have found out the gender has come and gone. I took fall off, my first semester off ever except to have my babies, in order to read to Christian, be there for Owen at the bus stop, and listen to Emme and Eliza tell tales of the newness of junior high and high school. Last night I headed up our street, on my own this time, in the wind and deep dark, because I needed the quiet (four kids is a lot of kids). I went to a boulder where I knew I could sit just off the edge of the road, and intended to sit there until I could stop looking back at this last failed chance in my mind, and stop blaming everyone else for not looking back with me.

When Mary visits her cousin Elisabeth after the beginning of her pregnancy, she recites a poem of praise for the blessing of wishes fulfilled: "He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away" (Luke 1:53). My focus is intent on my emptiness; others gently point out to me the good things. I sit on that rock and wonder. I think about the red gerbera daisies from a friend who didn't know they matched the flowers in the bouquet at my wedding, I think

about the sincerity in the voices of the people waiting for me in my overflowing little house, I think about my older friend who hugged me and said that sometimes it's about our willingness. *Be it unto me*. I teeter on that threshold for a long time. *Be it unto me*. I head back in the dark toward home, beginning to accept in my heart that I will never have five children, *be it unto me*, and that I am nothing if not blessed.

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This essay by Rebecca Clarke won second place in the BYU Studies 2014 personal essay contest.