

Once Upon a SAINT

by Rebecca O'Loughlin

Saints Joachim and Anna



My dearest children, have you ever heard of the phrase “break down the wall?” Literally it means breaking down a physical wall, just as God brought down the walls of Jericho through the obedience of Joshua and the Israelites. Joshua and the Israelites needed to pass through the walls of Jericho in order to get to the promised Land. But the phrase “break down the wall” has other meanings too, such as breaking down a barrier within oneself and allowing healing, or confronting the fear of asparagus and trying the first bite, or beginning that homework assignment that just seems too big and difficult. This story is about the grandparents of Jesus, saints Joachim and Anna. The tale can be found in the Protoevangelium of St James. Joachim and Anna had a wall in their lives that

was very painful to them: they were unable to have children.

Joachim and Anna loved one another dearly, and they tried to accept God’s will for them, even the fact they could not have children. They were wealthy, and so when the Feast of Harvest came around, Joachim went to the temple to offer sacrifice. The feast occurred when the harvest was ripe and the Jews would bring the first fruits of their harvest to offer at the Temple. Joachim brought twice as much as what was expected from him and asked God for His mercy.

"Lord, please let us have a child!"

The High Priest Reuben stood over Joachim as he was praying.

"Joachim!" Reuben said sternly, "it isn't good that you have brought these offerings to the Temple. You have had no children, and therefore you must have done something very wicked. God rejects your offering. Go away until you have made things right."

Joachim was horrified. He couldn't think of anything bad he had done that would have made the Lord so angry with him! He was very ashamed and sad, and decided not to go home to Anna. Instead he went out to the desert and fasted in great sorrow.

"My Lord God!" Joachim prayed, "what did it do that cursed my wife and made us unable to have children? I am so sorry for whatever it is. She is better off without me!"

After a long time, an angel appeared to him, saying: "Joachim, Joachim, the Lord God has heard you. Go home! Your wife Anna will have a baby to honor the Lord!"

Meanwhile, Anna didn't know what could have happened to her husband. She put on mourning clothes, assuming that Joachim was dead.

"Woe is me!" Anna wailed, "I have no husband! I have no children!"

Judith, Anna's servant, saw Anna looking sad. "Why are you looking so sad? It is a sin to be sad on a day of celebration! Here, let me dress you up fancy and put a crown on your head!"

"No, I mustn't dress up with Joachim dead!" Anna replied. "And where did you get such a royal-looking crown? Perhaps it was stolen?"

Judith turned up her nose at Anna: "I didn't steal the crown. And anyway, I'm not nearly as sinful as you are! God has cursed you and made you unable to have children."

Anna was very sad. So she allowed Judith to get her dressed up for the feast. But because she was so sad, she left the party and went on a walk in the garden instead. Sitting under a Laurel tree she wept and prayed: "Oh God! Bless me as you blessed Sarah and gave her Isaac!"

Anna heard a chirping in the Laurel tree and she saw a little sparrow's nest, and a sob broke forth from her mouth: "why was I born?! I am cursed, criticized by my own servants! Even this sparrow has her children! Water brings forth life, and the earth gives fruit in its time! But I alone am unable to bless you with a child, Lord, and my husband is dead!"

Do you remember what laurels mean in the ancient world? Victory. A wreath of laurels or bay leaves were often given to poets, runners and other victorious people. In Christianity it signifies Christ's victory over death. And in one important way this victory of Christ's was about to be set in motion. An angel appeared.

"Anna, Anna, the Lord has heard you. You will give birth to a very special baby who will bless all the world."

Anna fell to her knees: "Thanks be to God! I promise that I will give back this baby you have promised to me, as an offering to the Lord, as soon as the child is old enough!"

"It is good," the angel replied, "and look, here comes Joachim!"

Anna jumped up with a cry of joy, and laughing and running, she threw her arms around Joachim's neck and kissed him: "Now I know that the Lord God has blessed me! See! The widow is no longer a widow, and the childless shall have a baby!"

Joachim offered his ten best lambs and twelve best calves to the temple, and another hundred goats were given to the people to have a great feast in celebration of his new promised baby. This is beautiful, because his action showed that Joachim and Anna trusted the word of the Lord through the angel long before they had their baby.

Nine months later, Joachim and Anna had a little girl who they named Miriam (in the West we often call her Mary). She was born on September 8th. Joachim and Anna raised Miriam until she was old enough to be weaned, and then Miriam worked in the Temple weaving and serving the Lord. When she was a young lady, the angel Gabriel came to Miriam and she conceived baby Jesus. On the feast day of Miriam's birth, it is a tradition in many countries to make a wreath of herbs such as laurel (bay leaves) to be blessed in the Church and used in the winter season. Do you remember why? Because it was under the laurel tree that Anna first learned that she would conceive the Blessed Theotokos.

There are many lessons to learn from this beautiful story. Sometimes it looks like bad things are happening to people who God loves very much and has a plan for. Saints Joachim and Anna thought God had cursed them, when in reality the time wasn't yet right for them to have baby Miriam. But God not only gave them a baby, but gave them a very special baby who would grow up to be the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven and Earth, and who gave birth to the Savior of the world, Jesus.

You will find walls that seem insurmountable in your own life. Times of trouble that look like they are impossible and overwhelming. When this happens, pray: "Lord, I surrender myself to You. Take care of everything." And I promise you that He will!