

Disciplines of Readiness: Believe a New Promise

Isaiah 54:1-6

In the biblical tradition, there's a whole line of characters—significant characters—who are described as 'barren women', women who have not had children. To our ears (mine at least) that's an offensive term, but the Bible is a product of the culture it was written in, so that's not the point. In every one of these stories in the Bible, God reaches down to a 'barren woman' and pulls her out of the hopelessness, the worthlessness, the world has assigned her to. God says to her, 'I will do in you what you believed was impossible. And then, you will carry my presence into the world.'

It's an unmistakable pattern in the Bible. It's a *thing*. And here's how you make sense of it. The way that God's people, any ancient people actually, gained strength on the face of the earth was by population growth. More people meant more land, more workforce, bigger armies. Childbearing was the most important tool they had for maximizing a nation's footprint. In a patriarchal society there was no thought that men could be anything but fully potent, all the time; so if there were no children, it was the woman who must be flawed. And if children did not come to a woman naturally, there were no medical interventions that could save her, or her dignity and worth.

And so, barren women—women whose marriages were childless over many years—were the most hopeless people in society, valueless, beyond repair or redemption.

That's the context in which this strand of stories arises. Sarah, the wife of Abraham who was the first person on the earth faithful to God. Sarah was old, long since past the age when childbearing was even possible; and still, impossibly, she had a son. She became great-grandmother to the twelve tribes that eventually gathered together as the nation of Israel. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who became the prophet who named kings. Hannah too was shamed for her failure to bear children, so desperate that her prayers promised that if God would just see her and help her, she would give her child in service to God for life. Elizabeth, whose surprise, unlikely pregnancy in old age made her the mother of John the Baptist, the one who would announce that the Messiah had come.

These are stories of resistance to the world's judgment of impossibility. They're stories of the most dramatic miracles that could be told, God's refusal to discard the weak in a culture that valued only the strong.

Truth be told, the world often gives up on people. There was a beautiful piece in the *New York Times* this week, quoting letters that black women in America wrote to their daughters about the culture's willingness to discard them and the men they love. "As Black women we often feel the need to be superhuman in an effort to sustain the number of leaves in our family tree," one

mother wrote to her daughter. “You have muscles, but that baggage is too heavy for you to lift alone.”¹

I think I’ve talked with you before about David Brooks, the *New York Times* columnist who I’ve heard speak about his conversion to Christianity in the last few years. This is a piece of a TED talk in which he describes how his life felt before his turning.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iB4MS1hsWXU> (0:00 – 3:00)

You may not have a stapler in your silverware drawer, but I wonder if any of those words sound like they could be yours. Through some combination of conditions imposed on him and decisions he made a long time ago, David Brooks’ life felt to him both unhappy and inevitable. Like anyone in exile from the life they want to live, his discontent seemed like the only reality possible. The danger of living in exile for a long time is that we can become numb, incapable of imagining a time when things will be different.

That’s the picture the Bible’s exile story paints, and that we’re taking as our metaphor this Lent. The text we read a few minutes ago was spoken into *that* picture. And the stories of unrepairable barren women are its backdrop. To a people in exile, gone from home for so long that they weren’t sure they’d remember the way back, Isaiah said, *you are like those women*. You feel powerless; you can’t even imagine that something different is possible; but God has not given up the dream of your flourishing.

*Sing, barren woman who has borne no child;
break forth into singing...you who were never in labor.*

...
*Enlarge...your dwellings, don’t hold back.
To the right and to the left you will burst out [of your tents],
Your children will possess the[land of many] nations
and settle their desolate cities.*

To a people who felt like powerless refugees in an inhospitable land, this was an outrageous, unreasonable promise. It asked a brokenhearted people to trust hope against reality, believe in a future not one bit detectible in what was visible now. It encouraged them to attach themselves to a God who was not presently in charge of anything, apparently.

Dare to believe in something bigger than what you can imagine, God’s promise to the exiles urged. Hope for a future that is dangerously, outrageously good.

Belief in a promise like that does not come naturally to us. We have learned to pare down our expectations. We hope for small things: our turn in line for a vaccination, a return to restaurant dining. To invest ourselves in the possibility of more, to resist the current reality with great hope, is to risk disappointment. We hate to be disappointed. It’s easier to live with small, limited expectations. We stand ready, always, to say ‘I knew it wouldn’t work out’.

¹ “To My Daughter, with Love”, *New York Times*, March 3, 2021

Why is that? The writer Rebecca Solnit says it's because we are people who love certainty more than we love hope. When we don't have certainty, the world feels dark to us. Our hunger for sureness is so consuming, that we throw blankets of skepticism over even the brightest, most extravagant hope. What do you do when you realize you don't want to live in the dark any more?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iB4MS1hsWXU> (6:54-8:36)

“When you're in the valley, somebody has to reach in and pull you out.” The question for all of us, even those of us who think of ourselves as faithful, is: Do you believe that there is a hand that can reach in and pull you out? Whether it comes to you in the friend of a friend of a boy named Santi, or by something you'd recognize immediately as a miracle, can you live as though there is another reality beyond the one you see right in front of you? Can you trust a promise of life so powerfully different from now, that the world as it is might have to be *un-made* first?

This is what we need. This is what the world needs from us: to be a community that speaks with our words and our lives *and with our hope* the prophet's confidence—that we live in a different reality, that some surprising thing only God can do might actually happen.

It's not easy. You can't live like that if you trust only in your own power to change things. It's actually a little dangerous, to trust a promise that exposes you to disappointment. To live expecting the world's transformation, expecting our own transformation, requires from us a discipline, because it fights our self-protective instincts. It requires a faith that comes only with intention and effort. It will set us apart from most of the people around us, make us a peculiar people.

But what if the hope—the truth—of this dark time of exile is that this barren world is giving birth to *more* compassion, less curling into ourselves? What if, despite every appearance, we are being drawn, right now, toward connection instead of isolation?

This is possible. Anything is possible. Do you believe it?