

What You Can Do for Your God

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

Center Church

July 12, 2020

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I want to share a bit of my own testimony today. I have a complicated relationship with this story. As many of you know, or have surmised, I am an infertile woman, what the Bible calls “barren.” It’s actually an apt term to convey the depth of feeling around the desire to get pregnant and the inability to do so. My womb was barren; my heart was barren; my spirit was barren. I would have these conversations with God that went something like this: “so you brought a pregnancy to Sarah, to Hannah, to Elizabeth in the Bible, why not me?” On my better days I would laugh that probably God would cure my infertility when I was an old woman. Believe me, I have no expectation of that happening!

For many years, then, this story felt like a slap in the face to me. To the messenger’s faith question, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” I would reply, “Well, apparently.”

Somewhere along the line, however, my spiritual struggles around my infertility took a turn. In each case of these infertile

women in the Bible--Sarah, Hannah (mother of the prophet Samuel) and Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist)--God needed a child because God had an amazing project for humankind. In each case, God made the specific choice of these women, perhaps out of a depth of love, having heard their cries over many years. They got pregnant and bore a child because God needed them to do this; God needed their child for a special mission. Abraham already had at least one biological son, so, apparently, Abraham was not as important to this continuing story as Sarah was. For whatever reason, and God's reasoning is far beyond my pay grade to figure out, most of the time, the pregnancies of barren women came out of God's need for their child. And in each case, the collateral blessing was that they found joy they had never expected to know. Sarah laughed. I'll bet she did. I would have been rolling on the floor laughing hysterically.

I realized that I had been begging and pleading for a child because I wanted to be pregnant and give birth. I wanted this. For me. For Gavin. And I learned again the lesson that I had learned from my parents as a child. "You can't always get what you want."

To paraphrase John Kennedy, ask not what God can do for you; ask what you can do for God. Then anticipate that whatever it is that God asks of you might be something hard—go ahead, imagine a 90 year old woman carrying a child with arthritic knees, and then going through childbirth without anesthesia. Whatever God asks of you, there will be collateral blessing for you in some form, blessing that you could not have anticipated, blessing that might make you laugh.

Abraham and Sarah did not trust that God would use them in just the way God needed, the way God had promised. So, they tried to force the result, which ended up with the rape of Hagar. They had what Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggeman calls “resistant hopelessness” rather than “receptive hopelessness.” They were impatient with God, who seemed to be slow about doing what was promised. I know what that feels like and you may, too. Waiting for a good relationship, waiting for a job, waiting for a child, waiting for a cure. Lots of folk feel like that now; they don't want to wear a mask or take other precautions because they want this virus gone NOW! And so, by their impatience-directed activity, they cause more

damage. Like when you get into the wrong relationship because you're tired of waiting for the right one, or the wrong career, or succumb to whatever false promises for wealth or health anyone may bring. Why do you think so many people fall prey to financial scams? Tired of waiting to get what they think should be theirs.

Resistant hopelessness closes us down to the possibility that what we think we want might not be actually what God needs, or probably what we need, either. The laughter of resistant hopelessness is full of bitterness and without joy.

I know. I sat in that kind of hopelessness for years as I waited for the pregnancy that never came. With time, with prayer, with discernment, with the love of family and friends, with study of scripture, I found myself making the turn to receptive hopelessness, though I did not know that term at the time. I still felt barren, but somewhere inside something opened up just a little, a place where I still believed in possibility. And when I stopped trying to force God to do what I wanted, what I was sure I needed, only then could I be receptive to the idea that my desire to be a mother just might be fulfilled in another way, that what God really needed me to do was

to mother children who very much needed a mother in their lives. As the “receptive” part of me grew, the hopeless part of me faded away. No miraculous pregnancy came my way (and if you are listening, God, I'd just as soon keep it that way), but three amazing children did. The journey to them becoming part of our family was not an easy one for any of us, and was filled with pain and loss all around. It wasn't the journey to parenthood I had ever imagined, nor the journey any of them wanted to take to having parents, but it was the journey before us, one we did not travel alone. And yes, when my first son at 6 months old was put into my arms at the Philadelphia airport, I laughed with the wonder of it and the sheer unexpected joy.

The world we live in contains so many opportunities for pain, for anger, for tears, for hurt, for hopelessness. Beloved, we cannot give into that kind of hopelessness. When there seems to be no way, we need to stop being our own GPS, because God may make a way we could not have imagined. Because what God may need from us may not be what we think we want or need. Because waiting is

hard, but sometimes the wait is worth it, and to cut the wait short might bring us more pain, not less.

Psalm 113 has always seemed to me to be the prayer of those who are receptively hopeless. Listen:

Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high?

Who looks far down on the heavens and the earth

Who raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

to make them sit with princes, with the princes of the people.

Who gives the barren woman a home,

Making her the joyous mother of children.

Praise the Lord!

And ask God what God might need from you, then wait to see what happens, receptively, hopefully! Amen.