

Barren Belief (1 of 2)
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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Barren Belief
Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

Barren is such an ugly word.

Barren. It means a woman who is unable to bear children. These days we say infertility. But it still hurts. For some it feels like failing at the very thing that makes one a woman, at least in society's eyes.

Barren. The failure of hope again and again, month by month. The loss of hope.

"I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when feeling it not. I believe in God, even when God is silent."

These words were found scrawled on a cell wall in a German concentration camp. They are from an anonymous writer who offers us a deeply profound definition of hope.

"I believe in God even when God is silent."

Silence plays a big part in today's scripture. Zechariah and Elizabeth are old, certainly at least sixty, which is what the Bible considered old. And they have wanted, waited, for a child since they were married, probably at age fifteen or so.

God has been silent a long, long time. Forty-five years of hope dashed month after month as they replayed the same loss: no pregnancy, no child.

Elizabeth was considered "barren." Not only was it a personal tragedy, but also considered a sign that they lived an unrighteous life, that God was displeased with them and they had sinned. Barrenness was a social and religious stigma especially since Zechariah was a priest.

I imagine Zechariah felt barren, too. That is what happens when our dreams seem out of reach, when all we hoped for has died, been denied, when, despite our faithfulness, our pleas, our desperate prayers, God is silent. Or so it seems. Zechariah and Elizabeth have been waiting for God for a long, long time.

It's not a great time to live in Jerusalem or the surrounding towns either. The great Pax Romana or Peace of Rome is only peace at a price. Overwhelming military might and absolute tyranny shape everyday life. The people of Israel had waited for a long time. God has not spoken through a prophet since the prophet Micah over 400 years before. God is silent. How can the people hope?

So we are introduced to these people who have waited seemingly in vain. This is ironic in a way. You see Elizabeth's name is translated "God has sworn" or "God's oath" and Zechariah means "God remembers."

And yet, they are barren.

We go through barren times. Times when we cannot produce anything.
A job turns to ashes.

A marriage disintegrates to dust.

We plod through our 30s uncertain, or our 70s feeling an emptiness after retirement. After the death of a spouse or an empty nest or recovering from cancer or illness--you see barrenness can be state of the soul, too.

Maybe you know this place. A place in your life where you wait and wait and wait, and nothing changes. Where you pray and pray and pray and God is silent. Nothing changes. Where you try and with all your might and yet find yourself disappointed, alone, in silence. We wait and wait and wait. War continues, peace never blooms, change never takes root. Barren.

Zechariah hadn't heard from God in a long time. And when we don't hear from God, when God seems silent, we can think God has it in for us, or doesn't care about us or ignores us, or there is something wrong with us.

How do we find hope. Or make room for hope. Or dare to hope.

Or does hope find us...?

What is it that you hope for, really hope for, or have given up hoping for? I don't know all of your sorrows, whether a failing marriage, a terminally ill child, a broken friendship, a losing battle with depression, a yearning to have a child....

Has God been silent?

I can assure you that God hears you and God remembers. That is our hope. That is what our scriptures tell us is true. God remembers. We can have hope.

Hope is not a fuzzy sweet emotion or state of mind. It is an often a bitterly grasped, desperately clung to, painful, spiritual state. To choose hope is to choose life and to choose God. To believe that our lives are not barren despite how things seem. To believe that God is indeed bringing something new to birth within us, within our world. Even in silence.

It may not be what we have wanted, or how we have wanted it. But God remembers.

As Zechariah kneels in the holy of holies an angel appears. "You will have a son. He will be full of the Holy Spirit, he will lead the people back to God. Many will delight in his birth. God has heard your prayer."

And Zechariah can only stammer, but my wife and I are old! Zechariah and Elizabeth--these are OLD people. Look at that picture on the bulletin...

We make think Zechariah is a fool or a skeptic. He has been skewered by scholars for being faithless. But imagine Zechariah who had finally laid his dream for a child aside, dare he believe this angel, dare he hope again, hope which can be so painful, nigh on fatal. How can this be after all this time, after all this despair, after all this? How can people be joyful for us, they will think we are freaks? Do you expect me to believe this?

Zechariah is protecting his heart. "Don't tell me something that will not come to pass. Do not get my hope up." I imagine for him it had be raised too many times before.

Maybe this is true for us this Advent season. Dare we get our hopes up that this Christmas will be different. Can we hope?

This depends on what we hang our hope on.

If we hope that the past can be changed. No. That will not come to pass.
If we hope that our families will start to resemble a Hallmark commercial. No. That will not happen either.

But the hope that lives in Jesus coming to change lives, hope lives in new life possible for us and others, hope that our barrenness can be changed, then, yes, that hope is possible. This hope shall be fulfilled.

I listen to a radio program called The Moth which features people telling true stories from their lives. Recently I heard a story by a woman named Denise. She worked in a specialized lab shipping out blood samples to a different location across the country.

These shipments were special blood samples from women in infertility treatment and Denise dealt with about five patients a week. She found that these women were hyper aware of every aspect of the process.

She learned to micro manage their expectations, showing them the packaging, the containers, the shipping, the dry ice, the whole process in order to assure them that this would be ok. Because what was being shipped was so precious, often the results of six months of treatment.

For these women, hope was fragile thing. Denise found herself on the front line, telling women everything would be ok, she would take care of it. And she did. In fact, as she did the last step in the process of getting these packages ready to go, she found herself saying out loud “something good will come of this” as she sent off these precious boxes freighted with so much desperate hope

“Something good will come of this” she would say, sending out good energy to the universe and thinking good thoughts for these patients. (We might call it prayer.)

Denise worked there for years offering reassurance and care. These women knew her by name and would come by asking for her, sometimes at a less than opportune time, but she always stopped and helped them.

Many came back to share pictures. Or to say how pregnancy didn’t work out for them but they decided to adopt and can’t imagine it any other way. Look, this is my son. This is my daughter.

These women in a place of barrenness came to find hope fulfilled or transformed. New life came into their lives. And Denise made space, offered prayers, and gave reassurance that enabled hope.

What about us?

In our Advent scriptures, hope is going around. Even Mary, pregnant with Jesus, is not going to be divorced (or stoned) after all.

Zechariah is so full of hope that the end of today’s scripture is his song or canticle rejoicing in what has come to pass. For hope begets hope. Hope is catching or perhaps propagates. Zechariah’s hope is not just for himself. It represented his hopes for the change this child will bring. “His name is John. Yes, really!”

John eventually grows up to help others in their barren places, baptizing and bringing repentance out in the seemingly barren desert. Hope begets hope. Hope returns hope. Hope builds hope.

Hope creates hope.

You see Denise, the one who worked in the lab for so many years, had a big change at her job. The hospital has organized and she was moved. She was no longer working with patients. She was no longer in the business of hope.

She had also lost her husband six months before after long battle with leukemia. She found herself in barren place, feeling very emotionally fragile, and decided to join a bereavement group for folks who had recently lost spouses. However, there were not enough folks to fill out the group so it was opened up to include anyone who had lost someone recently.

At the meeting the facilitator asked Denise how she was doing with the work change and Denise burst into tears. She said to the gathering how, "I missed taking care of patients. I missed feeling like I matter. Now I feel like I don't belong in the healthcare field any more."

There was silence and then a woman sitting next to her asked, "Are you Denise? Denise from the lab?"

The woman went on. You made such a difference to husband and me. The day I met you I called my husband and said even though this is so scary, I think we can do this because I met the most wonderful person. We never would have made it through without you. We finally welcomed child into our life. Which never, truly, would have come to pass without you.

Denise had made it safe to hope. And so they did. And new life came forth.

Denise concluded. "On the darkest day of my life she said this to me. I always hoped when I packed the samples and said, 'something good will come of this,' that it would. I never would have believed that it would show up as an angel on my darkest day." (Denise Scheuermann, Something Good, The Moth)

"Something good will come of this."

It did. And then it did again. Hope begets hope. Hope creates hope.

In our barrenness, hope finds us. Hope finds us. Hope in the coming of Christ will not disappoint. It may not look like we expect it to. But light is coming. For you, for me. In our barren place. New life will come forth. Dare to hope. Amen.