

Sermon: Barren Promises

Year A, Second Sunday in Lent

[Genesis 12:1-4a](#); [Psalm 121](#); [Romans 4:1-5,13-17](#); [John 3:1-17](#)

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I asked you to keep your Bibles open to page 8, because I wanted you to glance down at something. As you were searching for Chapter 11, verse 27, your eyes probably skipped over that long section in the column before it, that is full of names and ages and the words “became the father of” over and over and over again. Some of you might have secretly dreaded that I was going to stop there and ask X to read that, with all the tricky names. When some of us imagine listening to Bible being read, that’s what we imagine, in the adults voice from the Peanuts special. And really, if the story about the Tower of Babel hadn’t gotten tucked in there, it would have been pages of names.

We know what it is. It’s a genealogy – Harry became the father of David who became the father of John who became the father of Catherine. It’s not the whole family tree, right, because there aren’t the brothers and sisters, or at least not until we get to where this genealogy is going. Terah had three sons, one died, one is married with two kids and then disappears from the story, and one has no children. There are pages of genealogy, truly that go all the way back to Adam and Eve. All to get to Abram and Sarai. Who are barren. This whole genealogy, that kept track of how old the dads were when they had their sons and how old they were when they died, this whole genealogy is driving straight into a dead end.

Because for Abram and Sarai there is nothing more that they can do. Everything that people can do on their own is done. They are barren and that whole line ends with them. There is no more future. There is no human power that can invent a future.¹

These barren places are where God steps in and speaks.² God speaks God’s promise to Abram and Sarai. *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* (Genesis 12:2) Without God speaking, without God’s promise, there is no new beginning for Abram and Sarai, there is no genesis.³ God breathes God’s promise over Abram and Sarai, and this moment comes.

We’re at an absolutely pivotal point in the Bible. Up to now, we’ve watched God call the world into being, out of barrenness, to be God’s faithful world. From this point forward, we’ll see how God calls a special people to be faithfully God’s people. This whole book of the Bible reflects on and witnesses those calls. We will see the gifts given, the demands announced, the responses evoked.⁴ Mostly though, we’ll hear the promises of God. If Abram and Sarai respond to God, we’ll hear the story of their family. If they don’t, we’re caught in a dead end.

Why are Abram and Sarai so special? Are they smart or rich or handsome or powerful or what? We don’t know. There’s nothing to tell us why God made this promise to them. They seem like ordinary people, just ones without hope and without a future. And sadly even that doesn’t make

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 116.

² Brueggemann, 117.

³ Brueggemann, 119.

⁴ Brueggemann, 1.

them special. God asks them *go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you* (Genesis 12:1).

That's when we learn one thing about Abram. *So Abram went, as the LORD had told him;* (Genesis 12:4). What's so special about Abram and Sarai? They are not only offered the promises of God, they accept them. Abram and Sarai enter into a special relationship with God, where they are willing to walk away from the posturing of this world that says we humans are in control of everything. Abram and Sarai leave the security of their country and their kindred and their father's house, and head out to found a nation that knows that everything is powered by this Holy Other who will be trusted and praised.⁵ Abram and Sarai leave their familiar barrenness for an unfamiliar new beginning.

If there is nothing remarkable about Abram and Sarai, we get told upfront what a big deal Nicodemus is. He's very learned, and very powerful, since he's on the ruling council in Jerusalem. He comes to Jesus at night and he asks questions about the kingdom of God. Jesus tells him that you see the kingdom of God by being born from above, being born of water and the spirit. In Hebrew and Greek, there is only one word for "breath" and "wind" and "spirit." So when you hear it, you hear all three. Jesus is reminding Nicodemus to return to his roots in Genesis. If you want to move from your dead end, your end that finishes with death, you must accept the promise of God, offered in the wind or the spirit or the breath. If you want to leave your barren life, you must accept the promise that God is making.

Nicodemus disappears from the scene after asking his questions. He will turn up again at the end of Jesus' life. But he disappears for now. Perhaps he was still confused. Maybe he couldn't find it in himself to leave the safety of what he knew, no matter how lifeless and barren it may have felt, since he was willing to go out after dark to ask an itinerant preacher a few questions. Maybe he had too much riding on the status quo. We don't know. But for all that we know more about him than about Abram and Sarai, he seems pretty ordinary too. In their own ways, we can see ourselves in all three of them.

It's easy to miss how the stories of God's call and God's promises are told. They are family stories. We meet Abram and Sarai, and then their son Isaac. We meet Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau. We meet all twelve of Jacob's sons and his daughter. God is shown in the particular, with individuals who have lives and jobs and spouses and kids who won't take a nap. We see God in the setting in which we live our lives, in the midst of families. Not always families formed by biology; quite often they are comprised of fellow travelers who have accepted God's promise and headed to the land God will show us when we get there.

We don't know why God chose Abram and Sarai. We also don't know how many other people, trapped at a dead end, lost in barren places, were also offered God's promise but who could not find it in themselves to accept. Think of all the people listed on pages 7 and 8 of our Bible, all their brothers and sisters, all the other children and all their children. The Bible tells its story through the lens of this one particular family. But there are millions of other families, all of them facing barren places.

Every family here, even families of a single person, have barren places. It's what we fight about all the time, about money or chores or holding the line with the kids. Or it's what we don't want

⁵ Brueggemann, 119.

to talk about, so we squabble about money or chores or holding the line with the kids. The barrenness is there.

And so is God's promise, God's breathing new life into our dead ends, if we will only respond. Our families are part of what makes us able to respond. They give us the courage and the humility to accept that God is providing the future we long for, the new beginning, the kingdom of God. Families make the response to God's promise possible.

And families make God's promise. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* (John 3:16)