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Bridgeway Community Church
Mother's Day
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MOTHER'S DAY 2024:

"In Jesus, Barrenness Doesn't Get the Final Word"

I. SERMON INTRODUCTION

Happy Mother's Day to all the mothers out there! Whether you are a biological mother, a grandmother, or spiritual mother, thank you for the role you play. And thank you, Dr Anderson, for allowing me to share this morning...

Dave and I have known for quite a while that we would be preaching on Mother's Day and Father's Day. And though I like to be prepared for things that I've said yes to, even I was shocked when 9 months ago, God brought a certain word to my attention when I was reading my Bible and when He said in my spirit, "*This* is the word that I want you to focus on for Mother's Day." Nine months ago!

But when I read the word, I thought: are you sure, Lord? This doesn't seem like a topic we would focus on for Mother's Day of all times.

And yet, He confirmed in my spirit to press in. Do you want to know the word that God brought to my attention that day during my Scripture reading?

Barren. Not being able to have kids.

I know. What an odd word to highlight on Mother's Day!

But the Lord knows what He is about. I plan on being real and a bit vulnerable with you this morning. So, I invite you to journey with me today both in Scripture and through some of my own personal story. Do you take me up on my invitation?

Alright. Then let's go...

No woman in the Bible wanted to be barren. To be barren meant to be unable to have children, and this was seen as a disgrace.

There are seven women in Scripture who were called barren. Each has a unique story. Some biblical accounts share more than others about these women's response to their inability to have children.

For those who are curious, I have a list of these seven women:

1. Sarah, the wife of Abraham
2. Rebekah, the wife of Isaac
3. Rachel, the wife of Jacob
4. Manoah's Wife, who is unnamed, but is best known as the one who becomes the mother of the strong man Sampson.
5. Hannah, the wife of Elkanah
6. The Shunammite Woman, who is unnamed, but is best known for her care of the prophet Elisha.
7. Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias, who is best known as the one who becomes the mother of John the Baptist.

We don't have time to look at each woman's story, so let's just start at the top of the list with Sarah...

II. SARAH'S STORY

We first meet Sarah in the book of Genesis. Now Abraham and Sarah were originally named Abram and Sarai, but in time, God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. To keep it simple, I'm simply going to refer to them as Abram and Sarai today. And we meet Sarai in **Genesis 11:29**. She is named as Abram's wife. And in the very next verse, Scripture says...

- *Sarai was barren; she had no child. (Genesis 11:30 NASB95)*

If I was Sarai and I was reading this account in Genesis, I might be thinking, "Well, thanks God. The first thing people know about me is that I'm a wife who can't bear my husband any children. The thing that brings me disgrace is the first thing people know about me."

God doesn't have to highlight Sarai's barrenness, but He does. And He doesn't do it to be cruel; He's actually setting the reader up for the story that's to come.

Sometimes God will take our barrenness and highlight it because He wants to use our weaknesses or sometimes perceived weaknesses, our points of hurt or shame, in order to turn barrenness on its head and show His good character. Barrenness is a source for God to be glorified, and in Jesus, barrenness doesn't get the final word.

On January 12, 2012, I received a call from a doctor that made my heart sink and caused me to cry. After a series of tests, Dave and I were told that we had a 1% chance or less of having children on our own without aid. I felt an onslaught of questions. In fact, I told you I'd be real with you, so on the screen you'll see a picture of my journal:

Read journal quote from **1/12/12**: (And I never wrote this thinking I would share this out loud)

"The reality is setting in that we're about to walk a difficult road, and this road offers no guarantee of success. So the questions loom:

- *What is going to happen?*
- *Is this going to be a long process?*
- *Are we about to face many moments of heartbreak?*
- *How do we make decisions that are wise?*
- *What will life look like if we can't have children?*
- *How do we talk to people about this?*

I realize that what's ahead is so unclear at this point. It may take a really long time before we get pregnant, we may never get pregnant, or treatment may be successful rather quickly. This "it's all up in the air" feeling is hard to process. As a result, today the tears keep coming."

We had been marked. We couldn't have kids. At least, not without an emotional journey with fertility treatments. In that moment, on that day, God was highlighting for us our barrenness.

Now, in our day and age, we have medical options. Abram and Sarai did not.

Let me recap some important facts about Sarai so that you can get a better picture of who she is.

- First off, **Genesis 12** tells us that Sarai is very beautiful. We also learn in **Genesis 13:2**, that Abram is rich in livestock, silver, and gold. So, Sarai was wealthy.
- In **Genesis 15**, Sarai's husband, Abram, is promised by God that he will have a son that becomes Abram's heir. And in time, Abram would have many descendants.
- We discover in Genesis that Sarai is 10 years younger than Abram, but at the time God gives this promise to Abram, he is somewhere between 75-85 years old. So Sarai is somewhere between 65-75 years old.

Ok, so let's notice a few things here...

What DID Sarai have?

- A seemingly good husband
- Beauty
- Wealth
- God's promise to her husband that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars

Granted, God didn't plainly say at first that Abram's son would be born of Sarai, but as she was his only wife, it seemed likely that she would share in this promise as well.

What DIDN'T Sarai have?

- Children
- An abundance of child-bearing years

It becomes clear in **Genesis 16**, that Sarai becomes tired of waiting. God gave a promise that Abram would have a son, but...what if that son wasn't meant to be born of Sarai?

Let's read **Genesis 16:1-6** together...

- *Sarai, Abram's wife, hadn't yet produced a child. She had an Egyptian maid named Hagar. Sarai said to Abram, "GOD has not seen fit to let me have a child. Sleep with my maid. Maybe I can get a family from her." Abram agreed to do what Sarai said. So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her Egyptian maid Hagar and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. Abram had been living ten years in Canaan when this took place. He slept with Hagar and she got pregnant. When Hagar learned she was pregnant, she looked down on her mistress. Sarai told Abram, "It's all your fault that I'm suffering this abuse. I put my maid in bed with you and the minute she knows she's pregnant, she treats me like I'm nothing. May GOD decide which of us is right." "You decide," said Abram. "Your maid is your business." Sarai was abusive to Hagar and Hagar ran away. (Genesis 16:1-6 MSG).*

III. LIVING WITH BARRENNESS

Even though Sarai had many GOOD things, what she didn't have, what she seemingly *couldn't* have, plagued her. And so, Sarai decides to face her barrenness head on. She thinks, "I can't have children, but perhaps I can build my family through my maid." And this poor maid, Hagar, becomes a pawn in Abram and Sarai's story.

See, Sarai faced her barrenness and said, "I'm going to try to control the situation." Have you ever responded to a circumstance in this way?

I know we've been talking about physical barrenness, the inability to have children. But being barren is a reality that can be experienced beyond infertility.

The general definition of barren is this...

Barren: *bleak and lifeless; stripped of vegetation and devoid of life; unproductive; empty of meaning or value.*

Have you ever felt barren? ...Have you ever felt like life is empty of meaning or value?

Some of you may be experiencing barrenness right now. You may be experiencing barrenness through infertility, like we've been discussing in Sarai's case and in my case. Or, whether you're male or female, you may be experiencing barrenness in other ways.

Through loss...

- Loss of dreams
- Loss of health

- Loss of wealth
- Loss of fulfillment
- Loss of a loved one

Bleak. Empty. Have you ever felt barren?

Sometimes barrenness is a temporary state. Other times, elements of barrenness last for a lifetime. For instance, when we lose a person who is precious to us, the Lord can meet us in that grief and bring healing to us, but on this side of heaven, there will always be a part of our soul that will feel empty without that loved one.

To be barren, whether short-term or long-term, is terribly difficult. It can be lonely, it can be debilitating, it can be oppressive...

- Sometimes, God doesn't heal in the way that we desire.
- Sometimes, we don't get the job offer that we want and perhaps even deserve.
- Sometimes, the wedding engagement doesn't come.
- Sometimes, our personal worst-case scenarios happen.
- Sometimes, good friends betray us.
- Sometimes, a loved one does die.
- Sometimes, our questions remain unanswered.

And what do we feel? *Barrenness of the soul.* Grief. Blank.

When I thought that we might not ever have our own biological child, I said to Dan Taylor, who was a pastor here at the time: "When I look ahead at my future, it's just blank. I can't picture it. All I see is blankness."

And you know what he said? Pastor Dan said, "But God can take a blank canvas and paint a beautiful picture."

Whether our barren moments are temporary or permanent, what might happen if we offer them to Jesus so that he can fill those blank and barren spaces?

But sometimes we don't let Jesus fill those blank and barren spaces. Sometimes, we do like Sarai, and we attempt to take control. See, Sarai sought to manipulate circumstances to her advantage, and it backfired. Hagar, her maid, ended up looking down on Sarai. Hagar felt superior because she could give Abram a baby while Sarai could not. And this led to strife, abuse, and nothing good.

I was discussing this **Genesis 16** chapter with my daughter, Reese, one day, and she said that when she doesn't get what she wants, she doesn't necessarily try to control a situation, but she will complain. And that made me think: there are plenty of unhealthy ways that we can respond to our barrenness:

- We can control, like Sarai

- We can complain
- We can covet what others have
- We can correct God; we tell Him that our plan is better than His

This last one is a response that I wrestled with in my own story.

After some time, Dave and I decided to pursue fertility treatments. We tried something called Natural Cycle IVF, a treatment that slightly varies from standard IVF. In March 2013, we began our fertility treatment journey, and nothing came of our first try.

I was wrestling in my spirit with God. **Here's a journal quote from 3/21/13...**

"I haven't thought the best of God through all of this. Many times I've wondered how my definition of good and God's definition of good could be so different. Though knowing God doesn't owe me anything, I have been upset at Him for not giving me what I want. After all, having a baby isn't a bad thing; it's a good thing. And He has the power to change my circumstances, so why doesn't He? I have viewed God as the One who denies rather than the One who blesses. I have allowed my situation to define who God is while wrestling to apply what Scripture says about Him. When it comes down to it, I've come up short a number of times in this past month. I have missed the mark."

But God was so gracious to me. My next lines were, *"The growing process isn't easy. Yes, I've come up short, but God is meeting me there."*

Friends, I didn't handle my barrenness in a perfect way, but I did offer every step of the journey to Jesus. I knew that I wanted to go through my journey of infertility with God, not without Him. So I prayed, I wrestled in my spirit, and eventually, in time, I came to the point of wanting my faith to grow as much as I wanted a baby. Barrenness is a source for God to be glorified, and He was glorified in my eyes as I learned more of His character as I walked with Him through this intense chapter of my life.

On **May 2, 2013**, I received a call from a doctor that made my heart soar and caused me to cry. I was pregnant. And nine months later, to the day, our daughter, Reese Heiliger, was born.

IV. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

So how can we respond to the barren moments in our lives? We already talked about unhealthy ways of responding:

- Controlling
- Complaining
- Coveting
- Correcting God

Question:

What are healthy ways of responding when we experience barrenness in our lives?

I'd like to share a few ways with you...

1. COMMIT EVERY DAY TO WALKING YOUR JOURNEY *WITH* THE LORD

Every morning or every night, it doesn't matter, VERBALLY commit DAILY to sharing your struggles with the Lord and offering your blank canvas to Him.

2. CONSIDER ASKING THE LORD FOR A PROMISE FROM HIS WORD

What do I mean? There are many promises in the Bible that God makes to His children. You may be asking, "How do I find a promise from the Lord for me?" To find these promises, *you* need to be in the Word, reading it and thinking about it...

- So, be in the Word. Open the Bible for yourself. Don't rely on a Google search for promises. Don't just listen to pastors preach. Open your Bible, and as you're reading, keep your eye out for promises from God.
- And when you see one and it seems to click in your spirit, then *ponder* that promise, *pray* over it, *memorize* it, *share it* with others and ask them to confirm it for you.

(Just a word of caution though: Promises aren't about trying to get God to do something for you; they are about staying focused on who He is and often about acting in faith to honor Him.)

A promise from God can be an anchor for you as you weather the emotional ups and downs of your journey. I sensed God giving me a promise during that season from **Psalm 27**...

- *I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*
(Psalm 27:13 ESV)

3. TALK TO TRUSTED PEOPLE

- It could be a Pastor
- A wise friend
- A trained counselor

Don't walk through your barren moments alone. And finally...

4. REMEMBER HOW YOUR STORY ENDS

Barrenness is a source for God to be glorified and in Jesus, barrenness doesn't get the final word. Despite what our circumstances say, barrenness doesn't get the final word, not when we invite Jesus to be the center of our stories.

There are two verses from the Book of Habakkuk that I'd like to share with you...

- *17 Though the fig tree should not blossom
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
18 Yet I will exult in the LORD,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*

(Habakkuk 3:17-28 NASB95)

We can rejoice because God is with us and is for us, no matter what our stories may be in this life. But God being with us and for us, that intimate relationship only happens once we recognize that we miss the mark and that we fall short of honoring God with our lives. When we recognize this, we are given the opportunity to call on the name of Jesus. Jesus is the only One who can step into the barrenness of our souls and bring life. And he offers spiritual life that will last.

And no matter what this world brings, we can remember how our story will ultimately end. That's what I want you to walk away with: remember how the story ends. In Jesus, barrenness doesn't get the final word.

STORY: This past autumn my daughter, Reese, asked if we could reread the *Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis. She is 10 now, and we probably read them about 5 years ago. And when she was 5, she wanted to watch the Narnia movies, but at the time I knew that the movies would be too scary for her. This time after rereading the books, she asked if she was old enough to watch the movie now. I told her that there still may be some things in it that scare or unsettle her, like the intense battle scenes. And you know what she said to me? She laid out all of the Narnia books on the floor, and she picked up the last book of the series called *The Last Battle*. And she said, "I can handle the sad parts of

the movie, because I know how the story ends! In the end, all my favorite characters come back and it's alright!" At the end of the book, the main character (a lion named Aslan, who is a Christ-figure in the story) returns, he wins the last battle against evil, and he brings all of the beloved characters back to life and takes them with him into his everlasting kingdom.

When experiencing barrenness, it can be hard to understand why we have to go through what we're going through. And as you heard me say before: it can be lonely, debilitating, oppressive. And sometimes, we never do figure out the why. Hold strong. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

Cry to him, process with him, wrestle in your spirit with him. But whatever you do, do it *with* him, knowing that when you stay with him, *you know how your story ends*. In Jesus, barrenness doesn't get the final word.

Amen & Amen!