God Will Not Leave us Barren or Abandoned
Isaiah 54:1-10

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Are you expecting? Advent is the season of expectancy, the time to remember that we have great expectations as we look for God to come and save his people. So during Advent we enter into the words of the prophets and the promises that redemption was coming near.

But Isaiah speaks in chapter 54 to those who are *not* expecting. He speaks to the barren, the non-expecting, those who cannot have children. It is a metaphor for God's people at this moment in history, their nation conquered by the Babylonians, their temple demolished, their population reduced like Block Island after the 1938 hurricane. Most of what they had gloried in was gone. Their best days were behind them. God's people are expecting exactly nothing. They are barren, not in some biological sense, but in their souls. There is nothing that is about to be born.

So I ask you again: are *you* expecting? Not "are you going to have a baby"—which would be a shock to almost everyone here—but are you expecting anything to be born, anything new to happen? Are you expecting God to do anything? I don't want to think this morning about the state of mind of Jews around 600 B.C. I want to think about our church and our own individual lives.

Harbor Church is not in a period of desolation. I would guess the most desolate period in our history would have been 1941 when, having suffered the loss of farming and fishing and most of the island's population, the church building burned to the ground. Compared to those days we are prosperous. But still I wonder if we expect anything. We come close to being barren in the sense of being almost childless. We rarely see people coming to new faith in Christ. We add members at about the rate we lose them. And we know that this is the condition of the majority of churches in New England.

But to us Isaiah calls out, "Sing, O barren one; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor!" The reason for singing is this promise: you who have been childless will have more children than the married woman with a houseful. Stretch out your tent, because you're going to need a bigger house! Can that be what the Lord says not only to Israel in its time of desolation but to his church today?

The image of the barren woman had a long history in Israel. Today it sounds sexist to call a woman "barren" as if she were deficient if she did not have children. But in those days the woman's whole reason for being—according to society—was to bear children. If she was not able to produce heirs for her husband she was not just a disappointment; she was a disgrace. Shame was heaped upon her as if she had deservedly fallen under a curse.

But at the same time, the mother of Israel was a barren woman. Every Jew that was ever born descended from Sarah, the wife of Abraham, who was unable to conceive until she was well past menopause and then conceived by a miracle. Sarah did not conceive on her own or with Abraham's help. Sarah conceived only on the basis of a promise from Yahweh. Her son Isaac—the one she named "laughter" because she laughed when she heard the promise and laughed when she had a baby at her age—Isaac was conceived on the basis of a word from God spoken by angels. And now through Isaiah the Lord is saying that Israel will have children again by

means of his promise, even though it seems unlikely on rational grounds that the nation will ever recover.

Isaiah's hearers would also have remembered that Hannah was a barren woman who prayed for a child and offered to give that child to Yahweh when he was born. His name was Samuel, and he became a judge and man of God, the one who anointed the first king. Hannah's song of praise was the basis for the song of Mary we call the Magnificat, because Mary and Hannah had a similar experience—not that Mary was barren but that she thought that having a child was impossible. She had a child by God's promise, not by the seed of a man. Mary's cousin Elizabeth was in fact barren and old, but she too gave birth to a child by God's promise—the prophet John the Baptist. So these themes of barrenness and expecting are woven all through the history of the Messiah and the season Christians call Advent. The story is—over and over—that to barren people God brings life in the form of a child. And that is our story as well: "Unto *us* a child is given, unto *us* a Son is born." The meaning in the story is not just that God made babies appear at particular moments in history, but that even when life seems to have run its course and there is no hope for something new to be born, God can find a way. As the angel said to Mary when he gave her the news, "Nothing will (ever) be impossible for God."

So Isaiah says to the people of Israel that they need to be big-tent people, not little-tent ones who try to keep people out. They need to stretch out "the curtains" of their habitation—the fabric of their tent. Make the cords longer and the stakes stronger. For many of us such language conjures up memories of putting up the big circus tent we use every year for the church fair. We know all about stretching out the cords and pounding in the stakes. Isaiah is talking about a tent to *live* in, as if Israel is a family living in one tent. But his message is as if the Lord said to us, you're going to need a bigger tent for 2012. Buy more canvas. Get longer ropes. You'll have to use stronger stakes than you have in the past, because your tent needs to stretch out to the right and the left.

I'm not suggesting literally that we need a bigger tent for the fair, but I am suggesting that we need to expect God to do something more than we have seen in recent years. If the people of Israel were to project their future on the basis of recent history in Isaiah's time, they might project—as some denominations have—that in two or three decades they would disappear altogether. But God wasn't giving them projections; he was giving them promises. Although you are barren now, I will bring you new life.

Isaiah 54:2, which begins in the King James "Enlarge the place of your tent" was the text for one of the most famous sermons in Baptist history. In the late 18th century a young cobbler named William Carey spoke to Baptist ministers in Nottingham raising the question of whether Christians have an obligation to spread the gospel to other countries—something no one in England was doing, and almost no one in all of Europe. He gave a sermon to the association on that question and chose this unlikely text to say that it was God's will to bring many more people into the church from other lands. You may have heard the slogan that was at the heart of that sermon: "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God." Carey, of course, became the first modern missionary and went to India, where he started churches, translated the scriptures into 44 languages and dialects, and worked against the caste system and the burning of widows. Brown University awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1807. His influence was huge. But the basis of the missionary movement was not a foolhardy ambition that wanted to attempt great things; it was the expectation that God would do great things.

Isaiah's poem in chapter 54 goes much deeper than positive thinking. It goes deep into feelings of shame and discouragement and abandonment by God. The poem moves from

comparing God's people to a barren woman to comparing them to a widow and to a wife who has been abandoned by her husband. It's a common thing in the Old Testament to see God compared to a husband and Israel to a wife, but usually it's to make the point that Israel has been unfaithful, chasing after other gods, practicing other religions. Israel is called a harlot while God is faithful.

But in this poem there is a very different move made. In the face of the exile and the loss of the Temple, the prophet makes a very bold move. He comforts Israel by saying that God is her husband who wants to renew his relationship with her, but he also says that God abandoned Israel "for a moment"—for the time of exile—but now he is coming back to her with great compassion. Pay close attention to what he says.

Verse 4 says that God's people—speaking to Israel but also to us—should not fear or be discouraged. Why not? Because now we will not be ashamed or disgraced the way we have been. In fact, we will forget all the shame and disgrace we have experienced up to this point. Israel's husband is now—perhaps is once again—her Maker, the Holy One, the Redeemer, the God of the whole earth. We are married to God, just as we say the church is the Bride of Christ. God has committed himself to faithful love.

That is all well and good, Israel might have said, but look around: we're in exile, Jerusalem is ruined. Where were you when all of that happened? Why didn't you help me when I needed you? This is the old problem of evil. We make up answers to the problem like "I had to give you freedom so that you could be in relationship with me, including the freedom to bring bad things on yourself." Or sometimes we even say "That suffering was a learning experience." Or even, "You deserved what happened to you." And to be honest, some of the prophets make all of those moves.

But here Isaiah says something different. Verse 6: "The Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God." So we say with Israel, Yes, I have felt like a wife who has been forsaken by the husband she expected to protect her. Yes, I am sad like a woman who is cast off like old clothes. But wait a minute, God. Are you suggesting that you are like *that* husband? No, you would never say that.

But then in 7 and 8 comes the bombshell. Here is God's explanation of the exile. "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer." Here's the truth, God says. I *did* abandon you, but only for a moment. My righteous anger made me hide my face from you, but only for a moment. But now that moment is over and I am wrapping my arms of compassion around you.

Maybe this is what tough love looks like. Maybe the truth of our relationship with God is that there are times God *has* to turn away from us and leave the house for a while so we can come to our senses. Maybe there have to be consequences, as we say, or God has to put us in time out.

But I can't read these words as we prepare to share the Lord's Supper and not notice that these words came true for Jesus himself in his humanity. For a brief moment, God did abandon him. For a moment, God hid his face from Jesus. But with great compassion the Father gathered Jesus to himself. And maybe because Jesus has already experienced that for us on the cross, we do not have to face God's wrath or know what it is to be abandoned.

The message for us—as for Israel—is not "God may abandon you, so be afraid." No, the message from God is, "I do not deny that you may have experienced times of shame and abandonment, but now I am loving you with an everlasting love." Verses 9 and 10 give us

assurance. This is like the promise I made to Noah. Just as I swore to Noah that I would never again flood the whole earth, I now swear that I will not be so angry with you that my compassion will come to an end. I love verse 10:

> For the mountains may depart
> and the hills be removed,
> but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
> and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
> says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

Those words inspired a Jewish songwriter in New York named Ira Gershwin, and these could be the words the Lord sings to us today:

> It's very clear
> Our love is here to stay;
> Not for a year
> But ever and a day….
> The Rockies may crumble,
> Gibraltar may tumble,
> There're only made of clay,
> But our love is here to stay.