

On Barrenness and Birthrights

Genesis 25:19-34

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

“And the Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’”

In this season that finds us headed down the shore or crawling on the turnpike extension to the Poconos or even taking a long plane ride across the pond, we usually have in our hand a book we have been meaning to read. For some that book is a novel (true confession: I finally gave up on *The Goldfinch* at page 458 with 313 to go); for others the book of choice is a mystery or a smutty beach romance; for many this summer it might be young adult fiction—in particular *Who’s That Girl?*--the first novel of our own Blair Thornburgh which she is signing at Barnes and Noble on Rittenhouse Square Tuesday night (had to get that in!). Maybe instead of fiction, you grabbed a nonfiction book with a one word title like *Potato* or *Cod* or *Thrive*. Then there are history buffs among us who cannot wait to lose themselves in a good biography. It is biography that invites us into the stories of Jacob and Esau this morning.

If you are a reader of biographies, you know that they often begin at the beginning, seeking hints in a man’s lineage or a woman’s upbringing that foreshadows what we call the “character” of a person, details that explain either her greatness or his downfall. Likewise the Bible begins at the beginning of the patriarchs’ and matriarchs’ lives, but the biblical writers do so for a different reason than modern writers do. As Old Testament Professor Richard Clifford notes, *we* “are fascinated by the psyche of individuals who ‘create their own destiny’ [while the] Bible prefers to see the young person (Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David and even Jesus) as one of the people and [so] looks in biography for clues about national destiny. [Scripture] speaks of nations *while* it speaks of individuals.”

Clifford goes on to say that we only get the national meaning of the stories about Israel’s ancestors when we pay attention to the details of the drama unfolding in the ancestors’ individual lives. The first detail that arrests our attention in the stories about Israel’s ancestors is barrenness. In the Bible, barrenness is not a biological but a theological detail. Barrenness alerts us to the fact that “there are no natural guarantees for the future and no way to secure the inheritance of the family.” It is a detail that played a major role in the character of Isaac’s mother and father as well as a detail that marked Isaac’s early life with Rebekah. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah had to trust not only their family’s future, but also the future of God’s promise of a people--generation upon generation--into God’s keeping. “Other families might have been free to invent and govern their own future,” Walter Brueggemann reminds us. “But this family is marked by promise. It receives life as an unexpected gift.”

Anyone here who has wrestled with the biological reality of barrenness knows, more than most, what it is to receive, after an adoption process or fertility therapy, the unexpected gift of a child. “Promise,” Brueggemann says, “requires an end to grasping and certitude and an embrace of precariousness. It is only God who gives life. Any pretense that the future is secured by rights or claims of the family is a deception.” This is so for us as individuals, but it is also so for us as God’s people, so for us as a nation, so for us as a planet! To ignore the detail of barrenness is to live with the arrogant assumption that it is your wits and wisdom, your power and might, your name and reputation getting for you the future you desire and deserve, when the future is God’s to give.

Yet here is the thing about details like barrenness: being created by God as creatures who may or may not live in relationship to God’s promises, our collective character is shaped by trust in something greater than ourselves or by the refusal of trust when faced with barrenness. God knows that such trust does not come naturally. It must be learned and practiced, valued and sustained. The longer the detail of barrenness marked their lives, the more Sarai and Abram abandoned trust by taking the future into their own hands. Hence Abram, when he was eighty-six, at Sarai’s suggestion, bedded Sarai’s maid Hagar. Immediately pregnant with Abram’s firstborn son and so a future, Hagar is told by an angel of the Lord that her son “shall be a wild ass of a man with his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with his kin.” That is to say, when we take the future into our own self-interested hands, conflict ensues personally and politically. Cluing national destiny in individual biography as the biblical writer is wont to do, tradition has it that Ishmael’s twelve sons, born to his Egyptian wife, a wife outside the bloodline of Abraham, became the Arab people, a people blessed by God—but, in Israel’s telling of the story, *only* blessed.

This brings us to the second detail in the stories of these first generations: birthright. From the beginning of this family and this people, it is clear that God will not be bound by human customs. Rather God’s favor and choosing

will prove to be “inscrutable and not a little unsettling.” In telling Abraham, now in his ninety-ninth year, that Sarah will finally have a son, God in the same sentence denies Ishmael his birthright as a firstborn son, the right to inherit a double portion of the father’s possessions and head of household status when Abraham dies. God instead chooses the second born to carry the promise, a dubious distinction from Isaac’s perspective on the top of Mount Moriah. Precious Isaac is forty when he finally marries Rebekah, a descendent of Abraham’s line whose betrothal to Isaac was carefully orchestrated by God. Like Isaac’s mother, Rebekah turns out to be barren; but unlike his own parents, Isaac trusts God, prays to the Lord for his wife and, *only* twenty years later, God ends their barrenness, giving them the gift of a future. The ultrasound reveals twins, which would have been cause for joy except that already the brothers had begun to struggle with each other in the womb. Actually a better translation than struggle would be that they “abused each other” in the womb, causing Rebekah to ask why she had ever been born. In response, God tells her that she has two nations in her womb and that two separate peoples will emerge from her body. Specifically, Israel and Edom are born of and destined for conflict.

Esau is first out of the womb: hairy and red, a wordplay on Edom, the elder is a man of unchecked hungers. Jacob is second in spite of his attempt to be first by grabbing his brother’s heel: the character of the younger is determined and scheming from the start. When the boys grow “old enough to act in accord with their character,” Esau becomes a hunter, an outdoors man, a man ruled by his appetites; Jacob becomes a quiet man, living in tents, though I suspect his silence is due to his scheming about how best to trick his brother into getting what he wants. In this way, Jacob favored his conniving mother who favored him, while Esau shared his grandparents’ penchant for making short-sighted choices as well as his half-uncle’s inclination to live at odds with his kin. “In contrast to Esau’s heedless volubility,” Clifford observes, “Jacob is unemotional and calculating....Jacob’s grip on his older brother’s birthright, ineffectual at birth, tightens in this boyhood encounter [and] will be complete at their father’s deathbed.” But remember, just as the character of each child has its origin in their ancestors, so the character of each nation will have its origin in the virtues and vices imbedded in generation after generation of its people. The writer has in mind the character of Israel and the nations as he unfolds the stories of Isaac and Ishmael, of Jacob and Esau.

Human beings live by stories, stories that tell us who we are and whose we are. It is why we grab a novel or two on the way to the beach and why I could not help but think, this week, about the current drama of individual character and national character unfolding while I wrestled with the present meaning of this ancient story. Considering the character of both fathers and mothers and brothers in relationship to the generations that followed, I found myself wondering: What are the details in our personal biographies and our national life that have led us to replace the self-sacrificial character of the Greatest Generation with the self-aggrandizing character of my own generation? When were the seeds planted that caused us personally and as a people to exchange the value of deferred gratification that was in my parents for the experience of immediate satiation that is in me? How many generations did it take for our national character, forged in our welcome of the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of other nations’ teeming shores, how many generations did it take for us to quit trust and be subverted by fear and hatred?

Reflecting on how the virtues and vices of earlier generations in a family become the destiny or fate of future generations, David Brooks wrote that “It takes generations to hammer ethical considerations out of a person’s mind and to replace them...with the...logic of winning and losing; to take the...human yearning to be good and replace it with a single-minded desire for material conquest; to take the...human instinct for kindness and replace it with the law-of-the-jungle mentality.” In spite of being a Jew steeped in the story before us this morning, Brooks missed how his words concerning the generations of one family were, in fact, words about a nation whose character partakes of Esau’s short-sighted hunger, of Jacob’s self-serving tricks, and also partakes of the conflict between them.

That is why, in an age when siblings are abusing siblings in the womb that is the world, I finally turned to another story, a destiny-cluing story that tells me our only hope is not in the character of our ancestors and the seeds they have sown in us generation after generation. Our hope is strangely in this present barrenness where “there are no natural guarantees for the future and no way to secure the inheritance of a family” save as a gift of God. Our faith is not in the grasping and certitude of political maneuvering but in the birthright of the privileged subverted by God’s son, God’s only son, God’s beloved who has redeemed our human character from out of God’s promised future by the love revealed in a manger and on a cross. Thanks be to God.