

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

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Advent Promise

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Luke 1:5-20, 26-38

Isaiah 9:2-7

Barrenness. Isn't it a bleak word? When we use it of a landscape we think of a place where little grows, or of the deadness of a landscape under winter frosts. And when we use it of a life it paints a hopeless picture. Barrenness features a lot in the Biblical story. It features a lot because it was one of the worst things that could happen to a couple and especially to a woman. (In those days, if a couple could not have children it was always assumed to be the woman's fault.) Imagine how it was for such women. Married maybe in the teenage years, at twenty, still no baby. By twenty-five, imagine how she prayed. By thirty imagine her anxiety as her prayers were mixed with tears of shame and disappointment, for herself and for her husband. At forty imagine hope slipping away as she wondered if it even made sense to pray any more. And at fifty? Why pray now?

It is the story of Sarah, Abraham's wife, and of Manoah's nameless wife, Samson's mother. It is the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and it is the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah. For Sarah and Elizabeth we know that they had prayed for a child long after the normal child-bearing years were past, long after real hope must have died. And today we read of how the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah and told him that Elizabeth would have a son and that he was to be named John. And Zechariah, who maybe hasn't prayed about this quite as much as his wife, finds it a bit hard to believe – he is old and she is old as well. And so he is told that he will be unable to speak until the baby is born.

The angelic messenger who came to Zechariah speaks some of the promises that needed to be fulfilled, the prophecies that were still frustratingly not come to birth. He talks of the spirit and power of Elijah – who has been promised to return before the Messiah will come. He talks of turning the hearts of the parents to their children, and the disobedient

to the righteous – in fact he seems to be channelling the prophet Malachi, since his is the prophecy which mentions that these things will come to pass one day. And no doubt Zechariah was intended to recognise this, and no doubt Luke wants us to recognise this as well. It was late in the day for Elizabeth. It was late in the day for God's people, but that was just in human perception. In God's eyes the right time had come, the time for action, the time for Jesus.

In a way the stories of Sarah and Elizabeth are a picture of the experience of God's people. The prophets had inspired them to dream of better days, of the wolf lying down with the lamb. The prophecies echoed the first promise to Abraham, that everyone everywhere would be blessed through his descendants. But time had passed and neither promise nor prophecy had come true – maybe in part because instead of letting them inspire them to work to these goals, people were sitting back waiting for it all to be done for them. Whatever, the people of Israel were not seen as a blessing to the world, far from it. They were in no position to be a blessing, being just a political pawn passed from one empire to another. They were still vulnerable to any violence that the powerful cared to unleash upon them. And so there was by now a great frustration among God's people, that the prophecies still weren't fulfilled, that they were still a vassal state, that the wolf was still devouring the lamb.

All of us know what barrenness is like. Frustration, disappointment, impatience, despair. It is not just the Elizabeths and Sarahs who know this. We can know it in our personal lives, in our relationships, in our families, at work and in our national life. Barrenness. We can all feel at times that we have something to give to the world, to our worlds, something good and beautiful and needed. We can feel that if only we could get our voice heard, things might change. We can wonder why we are here on this earth if our deepest desires and longings are to go unnoticed and unknown. But our potential goes

unfulfilled, or our promising hopes miscarry. So many people live on one side, and then on the other of the border of despair.

But that is not the end of the story, not when despite it all we keep praying. No, in the story we read today that it far later than anyone could have expected that the impossible happens. So even when we think it is too late for us to do or be whatever it is that we have been longing towards, we should not give up hope. With God it is never too late. Really never. Even death need not be the end of our hope. Think of

various artists who laboured on in their lives without recognition and then became famous after their death. Think of Vincent Van Gogh. Or the father of Genetics, Gregor Johann Mendel who dies before anyone realised what his experiments had begun to unlock in terms of the secrets of life. Or so many other writers and scientists, painters and others who felt they had something to give the world but whose gifts were not valued or noticed till after their death. Now, we are not all artists or writers or scientists or whatever. The longing and barrenness we know is different for each one of us. But God is the same God. God does not change. And with God it is never too late, never necessary to give up hope when we feel barren.

With God it is never too late, and, in the other side of the picture, sometimes with God our hopes are fulfilled before we even know what they are, and certainly before we are ready for it. This was what happened for Mary, when the same angel Gabriel came to her and told her that she was to be a mother long before she looked for it. But just as it was “impossible” for Elizabeth to conceive, or for Sarah, so, for a different reason, it was “impossible” for Mary. And that is the comfort and challenge of these stories: that the impossible is possible; that barrenness is not forever; that we can dare to have hope and even to align our lives around the impossible possibilities hidden in the present moment.

If there is one thing which the stories around the birth of Christ should teach us, it is to hope. Last week we talked about the hopes and dreams and vision of the prophets, and we are still there with them again this week. We are still with their hopes, which if we align our lives around, we will live to bring to fulfilment. Isaiah promised that the people who live in darkness have seen a great light. Maybe you are one of those who live in darkness – are you looking for the light? Do you dare to believe that there is light, the light of God, in the world for you, to shine on you, to spotlight you and remind you that you matter to God? Do you dare to believe that God will and does light your way before you, even when you do not see the way to go? The words of the prophets, the stories of Christ’s coming are words and stories of hope.

Isaiah tells that God has broken the yoke of the oppressor – he said this at a time when the oppressors were very much flexing their muscles, and that yoke seemed to be gaining in strength, not splintering and shattering. But he had faith and he had hope. Sometimes we feel oppressed by life, and by circumstances – do we dare to believe that God knows, and that God will relieve and rescue us? And sometimes we

see others suffering from injustice and the oppression of their circumstances. If we hear the hopeful words of the prophet, will we align our lives with their words, to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, near or far, and to work to shatter that yoke?

Isaiah says that a child has been born for us, a son given for us and that authority rests on his shoulders. Will we dare to believe that, and to give him that authority, to allow him, with his easy yoke and light burden. Will we dare to give him authority in our lives – as Mary did when she said, “Let it be unto me according to your word”?

Will we dare, in our barrenness and frustration and all the uncertainty of life to allow him to be our wonderful counsellor? To revere and trust him as the mighty God. To come to him in intimacy as the everlasting Father and to live with his principles embedded in our lives so that he is indeed the Prince of peace? These are words of hope and of promise, and while there is a time and a place for them to be fulfilled in the history of the world – in the coming

of Jesus and in his coming again – there is also a time and a place in our lives for them to bear fruit.

In the stories of God aligning himself with the lives of women – with Sarah, Samson’s mum, Hannah, Elizabeth and Mary we see that God is side-stepping the human way of understanding power and fulfilment: the so-called masculine way (though it is not just men who embrace it and live by it: we might call it the world’s way) of taking by force and demanding by right. God is aligning himself with those who have little power and who can only wait and hope and pray.

This is what it means to be alive in the adventure of Jesus: we present ourselves to God – our bodies, our stories, our futures, our possibilities, even our limitations. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord” we say.

So in this Advent season, this season of awaiting and pondering the coming of God in Christ – let’s dare to believe the impossible by surrendering ourselves to God, trusting God with all that we are and have been, knowing ourselves loved as we are, and for our stories, and courageously cooperating with God’s creative, even pregnant, power; in us, for us and through us. If we do that, then like Sarah, like Elizabeth, like Mary we can all know ourselves filled with impossible holy life.