

November 17th: Infertility

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be creating our own path through the scriptures. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. This month, our mini series is called “Family Matters,” so we’ll be getting up close and personal with some dynamics that might be playing out with your loved ones, or experiences that you’ve navigated. We hope that despite these heavy topics, we will find ways to support each other and find hope.

Let’s begin our time together with a quick prayer.

God our Creator, you gave us life so that we might experience it to the full. You breathed us into existence and have given us our own capacities for creation and birth, but we confess that this road to pregnancy or parenting can be fraught with loneliness and distress. There are so many of us who struggle or have struggled with this secret pain, and there are so few places where we can be honest about our suffering. Speak to us this morning with words of comfort, soothe our wounded hearts, and give us hope for our families, we pray. Amen.

If any of you have had the pleasure of being around children, working with children, or raising children of your own, you know there comes a time when they will ask the awkward and inevitable question that no parent or teacher or nanny wants to answer: **where do babies come from?**

Have you ever tried explaining this to an overly curious child who had a never ending stream of questions? Have you ever had to fumble for the age appropriate words while in a crowded store or while trying to stay on track

with your well intentioned lesson plan? I can say from experience that it's very difficult to get right on the first try, and there are lots of wrong things you can say, and I've said a few of them.

Because we're all adults here, we're going to skip "the birds and bees" conversation, but we all know that family building isn't something that magically happens, and it's also not the result of a kind stork dropping off an infant on our doorstep. Creating a family is a beautiful act, but it can also be complicated, both to experience and to explain.

Before we talk about this more in depth, I want to take a moment to say that there are many people in our communities who choose not to pursue parenthood or the birth of biological children. If this is the path you've taken, for whatever reason, I want you to know that this is a valid and faithful path, and there are so many ways for you to participate in God's plan for your life. You don't have to raise a family to leave a legacy that matters, there is so much that you can be remembered for and cherished for that doesn't involve pregnancy. You don't have to be a parent to create meaningful community and fulfillment in your life, there are plenty of other ways to have deep and lasting relationships. So if that's where you are this morning, please know that your decision is respected by this congregation.

However, for some of us, parenthood has always been a part of our life's plan. Even from a young age, some of us knew that having a family of our own one day was one of our heart's deepest desires. Maybe you played with dolls as a child and imagined what it would be like to swaddle a baby of your own. Or you imagined what it might be like to teach your child how to ride a bike. Part of what makes parenthood so compelling for many people is that the act of growing, birthing and raising a child is an act of creating another soul—and the deep connection that occurs between our souls and the souls of our children is a lasting and impactful bond that can change our entire lives. And creating another soul is so powerful, it can feel almost cosmic in its significance. Something that didn't exist just a few months prior is coming into being, in a way that we can't really see from the outside. It can be amazing to think that

our human bodies are capable of knitting together such a complex and beautiful being, we hold the capacity to shape and mold a body, mind, and spirit that will one day be its own person. Birthing and raising a child is soul-full work.

The author Elizabeth Stone said it this way, “Making the decision to have a child – it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”

But what happens to women or couples who desperately want to have a child but are facing difficulty or encountering some obstacles in that process? What impact does that have on our souls? Well, let’s first take a look at a couple of definitions, so that we can understand what different situations we might be talking about in this conversation, and the emotional, mental, and physical dimensions of these experiences.

In terms of what clinicians call “primary infertility,” meaning that a woman or a couple struggles to conceive a child, the National Institute of Health’s department of Child Health and Human Development reported that as of the past decade in the United States, 12% of women experienced difficulty becoming pregnant or carrying a child to term.¹ 19% of couples were unable to conceive within a year of trying to become pregnant, and 10% of couples did not conceive within two years of trying.² As a result, 33% of Americans have turned to fertility treatments such as IUI and IVF, or know a couple who has used these methods.

This part of the journey can be particularly isolating for couples, and even put a strain on the relationship. It can be easy to fall into the trap of blaming the other person for the situation, or blaming ourselves for not being able to give

¹ American Urological Association Male Infertility Best Practice Policy Panel. (2010). *The optimal evaluation of the infertile male: AUA best practice statement*. Retrieved January 7, 2016, from <https://www.auanet.org/documents/education/clinical-guidance/Male-Infertility-d.pdf> (PDF 188 KB)

² American Society for Reproductive Medicine. (2012). *Optimizing natural fertility*. Retrieved May 31, 2016, from <https://www.reproductivefacts.org/news-and-publications/patient-fact-sheets-and-booklets/documents/fact-sheets-and-info-booklets/optimizing-natural-fertility/>

our partner the child they desire. It can be brutal to watch other people around you get pregnant, or to celebrate a friend's baby when your own arms feel so empty. There might be feelings of jealousy, and then guilt for feeling jealous, and then a desire to withdraw from those relationships that are causing these conflicting emotions.

We also see that "secondary infertility" is an issue for a significant percentage of couples, as these individuals struggle to stay pregnant, or experience difficulty conceiving after a previous conception or birth. Part of secondary infertility is the prevalence of miscarriages, which is its own devastating situation for many families. The most recent data from the Mayo Clinic estimates that up to 20% of all pregnancies end in miscarriage, with the vast majority of these miscarriages occurring within the first trimester. That's up to 1 in 5 pregnancies that end in the most heartbreaking way. And while some miscarriages occur as a result of prior health conditions or infections, medical experts say that there is basically nothing we can do to reliably prevent miscarriage from happening. It is outside of our human control, and that can be so incredibly difficult for us to wrap our souls around. In those moments of despair, we can feel so powerless and paralyzed.

And that's not even counting all the physical side effects, both good and bad, that are part of this journey! From the first trimester to the first few months after giving birth, bodies go through a lot to attempt to bring new life into the world. Whether it's the hormone roller coaster, the swelling and shrinking of bellies, the cravings and mood swings, or the symptoms that are probably not polite to talk about from the pulpit, infertility can be a source of tension within and between our bodies.

All that to say, there are as many ways to experience infertility as there are people. It might have some common threads, but it can also be unique to each individual. Infertility might be the story of someone you know, or a family member or friend. It might even be your story, it might be something that you've kept hidden. It might be a wound that you didn't know how to talk about, because our society likes to pretend that situations like this don't exist.

This is a topic that our culture has difficulty talking about, because the reality of pain and suffering is something that most of us are uncomfortable dealing with. It can feel awkward to share these experiences with even close friends or loved ones, it feels so intimate and we don't always know how those around us will react. We might be afraid to voice the emotions and fears that are inside of us, because we worry they might be minimized or dismissed altogether.

So how do we cope? How do we search for meaning and hope in the midst of these circumstances?

Well, the first thing that I'll say is that not talking about it is not helping. Not talking about infertility is not making it any easier. Again, not talking about it is not working for our souls. We need to make space for those difficult feelings and devastating experiences to be shared, because talking about them is a way that can offer validation and support. There might be discomfort in sitting with those stories, but there is also great vulnerability and emotional closeness that is created in those spaces.

Second, God has a lot to say to people who are struggling with infertility, because infertility is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. From the Old Testament to the New, it's been part of our common story. Today we're looking at a lesser known passage from the Old Testament book of Judges and in this text, we have a record of a specific time period in Israel's history—an era when God's people were ruled by a series of judges rather than a king.

Our passage begins with this piece of context: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years." Starting in verse 2, we learn that God apparently has a plan to deal with this situation. We hear, "A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, 'You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is

never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.” These instructions are repeated at the end of our passage, just to make sure our biblical characters were paying attention.

I think we can agree: it’s a strange text, isn’t it?

I admit that this passage is not one that I’ve studied in depth before—it’s not a story that the modern church often turns to. But as I was reflecting on these verses this past week, I kept thinking about my college chaplain, known to all of us students as Pastor Judy. Pastor Judy is one of the strongest and most soul-full people I know, and this strength and character was partially the result of many disappointments and painful situations. She and her husband navigated a total of ten pregnancy losses, including the stillbirth of their firstborn Lucy, and many other miscarriages. Infertility and the grief of these experiences was a topic that she mentioned often, not because a bunch of college students were supposed to be thinking about pregnancy or the prospect of becoming parents, but because these losses were such a formational part of Pastor Judy’s life and shaped her understanding of who God is and what it means to be human.

So here’s what I think Pastor Judy would say about this story.

First, I think she would say that infertility is not a punishment for anything you have done or anything that you have failed to do. It’s true that some of our spiritual ancestors saw it that way and viewed the lack of children as a tangible sign of sin or rebellion against God, but the vast majority of Christians no longer believe that God intentionally withholds this kind of love or experience from us as part of some larger sense of political or spiritual disobedience. God loves us as God’s children, and God longs for us to have the desires of our hearts.

Second, we might read this passage and hear the list of God’s demands for Manoah’s wife, but we don’t need to apply those rules to women or couples

who are currently trying to conceive. Some of these demands, like the restriction of wine, make sense, but this isn't meant to be prescriptive advice for all time, and fulfilling all these demands is sadly not a guarantee that someone will get pregnant. If you are familiar with the infertility journey, you know that sometimes human beings get to a place where we would do anything to be pregnant—try a cutting edge diet, take a supplement, visit a different doctor, get a fourth opinion, whatever it takes. I can imagine that there's someone listening right now who is reflecting on this biblical narrative and thinking that they would have done even more than just abstain from certain drinks and foods to ensure that they could birth a healthy child. That speaks to the deep desire to create and nourish a new soul, but please don't fall into the trap of blaming yourself if the seemingly solutions offered to you don't work out. Please don't punish yourself if the cures that are peddled to you don't result in the desired outcome.

And third, if you're in the middle of this struggle right now, I want you to know that your pain is real and valid. You don't have to minimize it, or pretend that everything is okay, or think that you're overreacting about these losses. If infertility is part of your past experience, it's okay if it's still a painful part of your story. Your pain, even though it might be a scar instead of an open wound, is still real and valid. No matter how long ago it was, or the outcome of your journey, you don't have to "get over it," or feel a certain way—you're allowed to still be impacted by what you went through.

In book of Genesis, in the middle of another complex story of infertility, we meet the servant woman Hagar who is tossed out of the family compound and left to fend for herself and her child in the desert. But while she is in the wilderness, God comes to Hagar, and Hagar names God as "the God Who Sees," because God knows and understands her grief.

And this is still true today—the God Who Sees sees you. The God Who Sees sees your situation and all of your experiences. The God Who Sees sees your tears and hears your prayers. The God of women past, present, and future is there at

your moments of deepest despair. The God of couples trying to conceive knows what you're going through, and understands your unique grief.

So my friends, let God really see you this week. Let God comfort you if your soul is weary. Let God hold you if your body is in need of healing. Let God love you as a beloved child if your heart is broken.

Amen.