

Reversal of Fortune: The Story of Rachael
Psalm 113
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The story of Rachael, like other barren women in the Bible, is one of pain, frustration and desperation. It is also a story of restoration and a reversal of fortune. These psalms attest to the steadfastness of God and God's graciousness, even when we are not sure of those blessings ever coming to us.

When I read Rachael's story the one expression that came to mind is being "at the end of one's rope." I would venture to say that each of us here this morning can identify with being at the end of the rope. The expression means to be completely worn out, exasperated, or exhausted, to have no more patience, endurance or energy left. As a companion word, barren means lifeless and empty; also a way to describe being at the end of the rope.

The story of Rachael and Jacob is pretty well known. Jacob falls in love with Rachael from the moment he first saw her. He approaches her father Laban, and seeks to marry Rachael. Jacob agrees to Laban's terms; he will work for Laban for seven years and then he can marry Rachael. As the wedding day arrives, Laban tricks Jacob and he marries Rachael's sister Leah. So Jacob worked for Laban another seven years and then marries Rachael. Unfortunately, Rachael did not produce any children. What made it worse was that Leah had produced four sons. Leah also gave her maid, Zilpah to Jacob as his wife and she too, produces sons. Just imagine the frustration and pain that Rachael was experiencing; she was at the end of her rope. Understandably, Rachael envied her sister. She said to Jacob "Give me children, or I shall die!" Jacob becomes angry with Rachael and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" Things go from bad to worse as each of Jacob's other wives produce several sons. Finally we read in verse 22 the "God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach; ..."

The appeal of this and other psalms like it have to do with being lifted out of the pit, so to speak. We move from a downward slide to a restoration. These psalms reveal a movement toward overcoming the cause of despair. Rachael's story is not just about a barren woman, but about all kinds of difficult situations where we need some reassurance that things will get better.

Listen again to verses 5-9:

Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!

Considering a reversal of fortune in today's context, I am reminded of a story that aired on the news last month. A couple returned to the site of their home, now destroyed by the wildfires in California. Their home was a heap of ashes. The wife was hoping to find her wedding rings in the pile of rubble. After much searching, the husband found her rings and cleaned them up. Then, on the site of the burned out home, he knelt down and proposed to her again with the rings in his hand. She said yes. This story may not be entirely a restoration of fortunes, or was it? The value of the couple's continued commitment turned a very dark moment into a spark of hope.

It is inevitable that there will be episodes in our lives where there has been a downward slide. The tough part is how do we express our faith and how do we hold on to faith when it seems our problems take a long time to turn around? I like what Walter Brueggemann says about this. He says speaking up to God is an act of bold faith. We insist that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretend way. We also acknowledge that we must experience things just as they are and that nothing is out of bounds for God. It seems to me that in the very act of laying it out for God we are showing our trust that things will get better. In the Bible, several of the barren women threw themselves on God's mercy and prayed earnestly for a change.

The other aspect of faith is that we develop it and nurture it over our lifetimes. It is in our ongoing prayers, worship and study of Scripture that we discover the presence of God. We also find the support of others who share a similar faith. My point is this: we can become aware that God is in us, around us and for us by the spiritual disciplines that we practice. Then, like any discipline, it comes to us in tough times as well.

To return to the lesson of the psalm for today, we find that praise and thanksgiving show up again. Then God remembered Rachael and she gave birth to a son. Life was not always easy then, nor is it now. But, God does hear us and sometimes the results are different than what we expect, but better than before. Gratitude feels pretty good.