

## *How the Women of the Bible Helped Me Reimagine My Barrenness*

By Kaya Oaks

A few years ago, I was at a Sunday Mass at a church where a friend was serving as a deacon. It was Mother's Day, and at the end of the service, every woman in the congregation who was a mother was asked to come forward to receive a flower. Roses, I think. Red ones. As women filtered out of the pews around me and the priest smiled and waved them forward, I remained seated, sharing an embarrassed smile with the woman next to me. It was really nobody's business that we did not have children, but now everyone around us knew. I am stoic by nature and do not cry easily, but shame welled up inside of me, and so did a burst of unexpected tears. Embarrassed, I gathered my things and left.

Two years later, I had a hysterectomy. Hysterectomy is major surgery, with potential consequences ranging from early menopause to increased risk of heart disease if the ovaries are also removed. No one goes through it cavalierly. After three decades of severe monthly pain and heavy bleeding, I went to the emergency room one night and was told that multiple large cysts on my ovaries were beginning to rupture. After a series of follow-up scans and biopsies, it was clear that I needed surgery, which I had in May 2019.

My surgery took place about six months after the Vatican issued a follow up to its 1983 document on hysterectomies. This update took up the question of whether or not a uterus that is "no longer suitable" for procreation can be licitly removed from a woman's body. According to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a "defective" uterus, one that cannot support a pregnancy, can be removed without sterilizing a woman, because she is effectively already sterile.

The document does not go into the medical reasons why a woman would undergo a hysterectomy, but they are far from uncommon. After cesarean sections, a hysterectomy is the second most common surgery women go through, with half a million being performed annually in the United States. For most women, hysterectomies are a last resort after enduring years of crippling pain and severe bleeding from conditions like adenomyosis, fibroids, or because of cancer in the uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes or ovaries.

I have a condition called endometriosis. The condition causes the lining of my uterus to leave deposits on the internal organs as it sheds, and these deposits swell and bleed. They can also cause the kind of ovarian cysts I had. Endometriosis causes infertility, severe pain and heavy bleeding, which in turn can lead to anemia, fatigue, digestive issues, and in some cases is linked to an increased risk of cancer. One in 10 women has it, but it is difficult to diagnose, so many assume their pain is normal. I also had fibroids, problems with my uterine lining and a cervical polyp. In other words, my uterus was not only "no longer suitable"—it had never really worked properly. I was barren, and by the time I had the surgery in my late 40s, I had mostly made peace with that.

But my church kept reminding me that this barrenness made me an outlier. It was not just the Mother's Day celebrations. It was also the constant talk about Catholic "supermoms," the focus

on families with children, the praise of fertility and fecundity as the true measure of womanhood. As the daughter of a mother who worked full time, raised five children and was widowed at a young age, I recognize that bringing up a family really is a superpower and that mothers do incredible things. But women who don't have children—and are not women religious—also have many gifts to give the church and the world. I know we exist, and I know we're not alone. But we are hard to find in the Catholic imagination.

Catholics are accustomed to thinking about celibate, childless clergy and women religious, and we are accustomed to celebrating that choice. Celibate clergy can talk about how not having children frees them up to share love with more people and to be self-sacrificing, but in my experience, conversation among parish groups for women always focuses on children in one way or another. The first question I am always asked when I attend a new parish is whether or not I have kids, which is always an awkward, embarrassing and, frankly, invasive moment.

There are as many reasons why a woman may not have children as there are women, and I do not think interlocutors about my fertility really want to sit through a list of my medical woes. We are increasingly aware, for example, that it is not O.K. to greet someone by saying they look like they have lost weight. They may, after all, have cancer or be recovering from Covid-19, or they may have an eating disorder. They may be grieving or depressed. Why, then, do so many people persist in beginning conversations by asking women if they have children? In her book *The Mother of All Questions*, the writer Rebecca Solnit says her comeback to this question is “Would you ask a man that?” and that this response usually ends the conversation. But she also writes that asking if a woman has children “assumes there is only one proper way for a woman to live.”

So like many other women in my situation, I have had to recast my understanding of barrenness to see it as a space of possibility. It took the help of a Jewish friend to get there.

Over the past year, as I have been working on a book about social and religious expectations of how women should be, I have also participated in a writing group made up of women who do not have children. This was just a coincidence—we never set out to make it exclusive. But I have found the group to be a helpful place to think through ideas about women who are outliers. And as I wrestled with the problem of failing to find examples of childless women in the Bible, one of my friends suggested I look into Queen Esther and the Purim story.

On the feast of Purim, the Scroll of Esther is read in synagogues as Jewish people celebrate her key role in their delivery from annihilation. Discovering that a pivotal figure like Esther, who saves her people from death, also happens to be childless, can help us understand that childlessness in Scripture cannot be understood only as a curse. For some of the women in the Hebrew Bible, childlessness ends when God “opens their wombs.” But for others, the absence or presence of children is simply never mentioned (and this in a book obsessed with lineage), yet these women are honored and celebrated as heroic figures, prophetesses and deliverers of their people. Perhaps Esther never had children, but instead the Jewish people of Persia, saved by her quick thinking, become heirs to her legacy.

Miriam, the sister of Moses and one of the major prophetesses, is associated with Miriam's Well, a miraculous spring that kept the Israelites alive during the Exodus. Since the 1980s, Jewish

feminists have added a cup of water to the seder table to celebrate Miriam's *mayim hayim*—the “living water” Jesus will later drink from when it is handed to him by a woman, also at a well. Letty Cottin Pogrebin says that for Jewish women, Miriam, who led her people through the parted waters of the Red Sea by singing and dancing, “introduced the notion of radical change as worthy of celebration.” And unlike her brother Moses, it is never mentioned that Miriam had children.

In the New Testament, Jesus first appears after his resurrection to another Jewish woman, Mary Magdalene, who runs and tells the male apostles what she has seen. This means that the earliest embodiment of Christianity is in a single, childless woman. Like Esther and Miriam, if Mary Magdalene ever had children, they are not mentioned, and that frees her up not only to be an apostle, but to spend time with Jesus to build a relationship of deep trust. Unfortunately, that relationship has been imagined by everyone from Nikos Kazantzakis to Dan Brown as carnal and regenerative, rather than platonic. Because what could two childless people possibly get up to other than sex and reproduction? But feminist theologians would rather meet Mary Magdalene as she arrives: alone, unencumbered and ready to reinvent herself.

A shrine in Saint-Maximin-la-Saint-Baume, France, is believed to be Mary Magdalene's last resting place. According to local lore, she arrived there in a boat without oars or sails and later spent her days in a cave, ministering to those who managed to find her. For centuries, the more common teaching in the Catholic Church, despite a lack of evidence, was that Mary Magdalene was a repentant prostitute whose only option for redemption was to seek forgiveness from a man. Imagine if we had learned, instead, that she arrived in a new country of her own volition, shaped her own reinvention and led her community through dangerous times.

No woman deserves to be seen as one-dimensional. There are as many kinds of mothers as there are women without children. We must not reduce motherhood to pious clichés. We must recognize all the complexities that come with having children as well as the fact that the moral and ethical and psychological complexities all women must negotiate are not solely determined by their ability to procreate. If I was embarrassed and ashamed on the day the church called mothers up to the altar for flowers, imagine how much more painful that experience might be for the woman struggling with infertility, the woman with ovarian cancer or the woman whose child has died.

Our Catholic faith, rooted in the faith of people who lived in the deserts, has sometimes missed out on the complexities of women's lives. But those who look at a desert and see lifelessness have missed the genius of creation that allows cacti to store water in their flesh, gives people the vision of building their homes in the side of cave walls, helps every kind of crawling and leaping thing to adapt. Like everything alive in the desert, women who live without children adapt and survive. Sometimes it strikes me that this is what Esther, Miriam, Vashti, Judith, the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, Dinah, the unnamed daughters of Zelophehad, Deborah, Yael, Tabitha, Anna the prophetess, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and many of the women in the early church like Lydia, Junia and Phoebe—none of whom are described as mothers—had to do to survive in their own era. Any woman trying to recreate herself when others have looked at her and seen only emptiness may instead find other ways to nurture and care for the world around her.

Perhaps that does not earn us a flower, but that does not mean we cannot grow.

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