

# Empty Spaces

*JoLyn Brown*

Sometimes my children slept in his place.

Hyrum, ten years old, lanky, and thin, climbed in bed with me one night early in the treatments. He wanted to talk. Exhausted, I fell asleep mid-word and woke up to him laughing.

“You said something about coconut babies.”

Giggling like a drunk teenager, I tried to explain myself. “We were talking about your allergies and then . . .” And then my tired brain moved on to babies. “Maybe we better go to sleep.”

Eleanor, four years old, curly red hair matted like a halo around her head, would come in during the night. I could have taken her back to bed. Instead, I often let her fall asleep pressed against me, her face on my pillow, her sweaty-warm body waking me every time I moved.

I was not used to my children in my bed with me. Letting them stay was comforting, but also alarming. My body woke over and over to find them in the darkness, to listen to the unfamiliar sounds of breaths that were not my husband’s. My discomfort was small in face of their comfort. Already, my body had been held up as offering for them through our short years together. I knew my love walked hand in hand with pain. What frightened me was not the idea of giving up more for them, but the real concern that this time, I wouldn’t be enough. When the hollowed-out spaces around us were fully swiped dry by what cancer extracted from us, how would I draw from my own emptiness to fill theirs?



A little over a year before the cancer, the sense of a child came to me while reading my scriptures. Tucked up against my pillows, scanning

lines, an awareness spread over me. The feeling was all-engulfing—a warm and pulsing sensation at my core coupled with a clarity of insight in my mind—as if seeing through a newly cleaned lens. I knew two things: another child was waiting to come to our family, and his name was James. By this point, we’d been trying to have another child for a year. I started a medication that could increase our chances of getting pregnant. It altered my hormones and was only safe to take for a certain amount of time. Three months in, I got a positive pregnancy test.

About a week later, on the day I first saw blood, my husband’s sister, Rebecca, was at my house. On the cusp of a painful divorce, she and her two children were visiting Utah for the first time in ten years. I’d only met her once before.

“I think I’m losing a baby,” I told her. I crawled onto the couch and stayed there all day. There was a physical pain, aches through my back and stomach, but there was another pain no one could notice. Invisible pain. And invisible voices in my head that said, “Take some ibuprofen and get on with life. This is hardly worth making a fuss over. Five weeks is nothing—means nothing.” *Nothing* is a strangely terrible thing. *Nothing* hurts. *Nothing* is pain you feel guilt for having; a thing we do not speak of.

Rebecca stayed with me. There was room for both of us, still so uncertain of each other, to grieve together for a tiny life. “I lost a baby. A girl named Isabell. At five months along,” she told me. “I sensed that she wasn’t going to live long. I just knew.”

There is no way to explain this knowing we both experienced; it just comes. James was still with me, the presence of a child I couldn’t see, still waiting to be mine.

A few months later, the doctors let me try one last round of treatment. “It’s the last one we can do. This medicine isn’t safe to be on for long.”

A month later, I got another positive test. The same week, while lying in bed, a change came over the room. A hushed and sacred light I sensed but did not see permeated the space beside me. I felt James along with the presence of many angels I couldn’t name. I knew then that the body I carried was meant for James.

*I knew.*

A few days later, I saw blood.

When God promised Sarah she would have a baby, she laughed. She was an old woman, and my thirty years of life were nothing compared to her lifetime of longing. I imagine them sometimes: Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah. But mostly, I see Sarah, this shadowy woman who I find between the lines in Genesis.

Did Sarah never get pregnant until Isaac? Or were those years full of blood and loss?



Sometimes I'd lie in the king-size bed alone, the space that was Jacob's cold and wide. I slept on my side of the bed, curled up like he was still there. When I woke in the night and remembered he was gone, I'd roll toward the emptiness and spread out, trying to fill what was missing.

After I lost James, I took Hyrum to the Provo Utah Temple grounds. Normally, the many flower beds outside a temple are full of color and growth, but this evening, they were bare and dead. Sitting on the edge of one of the beds, I reflected on my disappointment with the barren space.

When the thought came, it wasn't loud; it simply settled over me. *This is the bed where they will put the statue of Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child.* I could clearly remember walking up the path in the cold of a winter evening years before, passing the nativity scene backlit by the temple. *They are making room for me.*

When Sarah finally found herself pregnant, when she held Isaac in her arms for the first time and touched the soft rolls of baby fat on the real and living child God gave her, did she remember the years of being barren? In my mind, I see her cradle the child to her breast and look to heaven. She is thankful for all the winters she has walked in cold and dark, relying on a promise made by God. If Abraham is to be father of many nations, then she is mother of the same. She sees for the first time the balance of her pain, a child who is loved with a magnitude only equaled by her loss.

That much sorrow has made room for this much joy.

A year after my experience at the temple in the barren beds left by the winter, I had nothing but space for God. I just wasn't sure how he planned on filling it. Was it a question of faith? Maybe if I did enough, tried enough, I would be enough for my husband and children.



When Jacob came home, sleeping didn't get easier.

The drains in his side had to be hung from the bed. Before they fixed the liver drain that was siphoning the fluids as fast as he took them in, I would sometimes get up in the middle of the night to help him empty it. The hole in his side was just another opening that shouldn't be there, another space unable to be filled.

The first time he came home after chemo treatments, he had cold chills that shook his body. I piled blankets over him as he trembled in the

dark room and pulled a beanie hat over his head. He left me then, to a place of enduring that was inside his head.

When the chemo got into his body, even my touch hurt him. I slept half-awake then, afraid of brushing against him. There was a distance in that too.

Another time, we slept with the chemo machine pumping between us, poison occupying the space our bodies might meet.

It's a desperate thing, this tangle that forms inside you as you try to unravel how you'll save someone. Sometimes it's like a mental checkbox; do this and that, and this and that, and he will live. Sometimes it's just mad running, yelling for help before it's too late.

I sometimes thought it was my fault James died. Maybe I ate something, moved a certain way, or something was wrong with my body. I wondered if I should try to get pregnant again, or if the chance to be James's mother had passed. The urgency had left me, and I didn't know what that meant. Had he lived, somehow, in a five-week speck of an embryo inside me? Was that all that he would get of life? Or was God giving him to someone else?

When Sarah heard God wanted Abraham to sacrifice their only child, did she think she'd done something wrong? Was she angry? Did she make a checklist of things she could do to save him? Did she cling to Abraham, begging for him to do something before it was too late?



The week before Thanksgiving, Jacob finished his chemo treatments. Like Sarah and Abraham welcoming a longed-for baby, we celebrated prematurely. Thanksgiving night, his body crashed, the weeks of built-up chemo leaving him limp and dazed. A pain hit, sharp and clawing in his side, followed by fevers. I sat on the couch beside him and prayed.

That night he was admitted to the ICU. His blood counts were too low, he had a blood clot in his arm, and he'd contracted a superbug infection called MRSA. If one problem didn't kill him, the other could.

Later that week, I dropped to my knees and begged God to tell me if my husband would live. I could almost see a world of spirits in my mind, a space full of souls who once lived.

*I can use him here. I have work for him.*

How do you tell God no? When you've walked through hell with him once before and you've come out the other side, how do you question him? I had a fire-branded memory of a dark night in a parking lot the December after my miscarriage.

That night I had curled toward the steering wheel and wept as words I'd avoided for months spilled from my lips. "Is James dead? Is there really no chance of me carrying a body for him to term? Of holding him in my arms?"

The answer wasn't words so much as thoughts, *He has passed on.*

"But I was only five weeks along."

*It was enough. You have done enough. It was all I required of you.*

The peace that blossomed inside me shared space with my tears. Death, the worst possible outcome I could think of, had been confirmed. There would not be another pregnancy. James had lived the life he was meant to live. With clarity, I looked back on the day I felt him in my room, and I knew that the moment had been one of both life and death.

The same sense of a voice in my thoughts asked me, *Now that you know how hard it is to lose James, would you do it again, if you had to make the choice over?*

When we encounter the empty spaces of sacrifices God asks us to make in life, they are rarely only about us. I had made an imperfect body for my child, but it had been all he needed. There was no hesitation in my answer. It was and will always be, "Yes."

In the end, even though it made no sense at all, even though it hurt worse than anything she'd ever known, Sarah let Abraham take Isaac.

On my knees beside my bed, when God told me he might take my husband, I couldn't say no either.



On the day of the surgery to clean out the infection growing in Jacob's body, I ended up in the waiting room alone.

Sometimes it feels like hard things are a rite of passage to endure. We stand in the human experience and think we must stoically bare this pain, that somehow, we get more faith points for never showing our fear. Maybe we visualize an angel in heaven keeping tally of all the times we scraped the bottom of our souls without flinching.

I didn't tell anyone I thought my husband might die. Oh, I made sure my children weren't alone. After leaving them in the care of my parents, I set out like a sacrificial offering to the hospital by myself. *See, I'm not flinching. No fear.*

It was a lie.

I sat in a blue padded chair with wooden armrests and saw them wheel Jacob back on a bed. For hours I sat alone in that chair, a storm of fear building inside me. I knew Jacob would die in there. The room

stretched around me, hazy and faded, the rush of sound in my ears like water I couldn't slow. The space between me and God tilted, and I finally found the words I hadn't been able to speak.

*"Please. Don't take him."*

If life is about opposites, if our existence requires first sorrow to find joy, then where is faith if we never experience fear? If we never taste bitterness on our tongues, never feel its breath on our face, never hear its hiss in our ear, is what we hold up really any sort of faith at all?

I see Sarah. She watches her husband and son leave, but her faith isn't numbness. It's not perfectly beautiful, but ugly with pain. Faith is also the Sarah that collapses to her worn and creaking knees in the abandoned tent she calls home, tears rolling down wrinkled and faded cheeks. She finds words, drawing on years of practice from all of her dark winter spaces. She turns to the Father she has learned to trust above all things. "Please, if there is any other way, don't take him."

*Don't take him.*



What I felt next was the presence of an angel woman next to me in the waiting room. I knew, almost distantly, I was having a panic attack. Somewhere in the darkness and fear, I was still reaching for God, but I couldn't find peace. But I *could* feel her. She reminded me of my husband's sister, Rebecca.

I sent out a text.

Less than thirty minutes away, my sister-in-law, Rebecca, already had a thought come to her that she needed to shower and get ready. I was going to need her. When my text came in, she and her new husband, the man whose recently passed first wife I had been feeling next to me in the waiting room, got in their car and came.

Sacrifice is providing something for another of God's children they cannot do for themselves. Miracles are when someone does something for you that you cannot do for yourself. I was still in the waiting room praying for my metaphorical ram in the thicket when Rebecca and Ryan arrived.

Jacob was wheeled from the surgery hours later than the doctors said it would take. They took him up to the recovery floor and by the time we got in the room, he was in so much pain, he could hardly speak. "We can't give him any more pain medication until the anesthesia wears off," the nurse told us before she left.

As he moaned and wept in pain, I sat beside him. I could do nothing. I'd emptied myself completely and had nothing left to give. Tears ran

down my face. Ryan laid his hand on the tray between us. “Here, squeeze my hand as hard as you need to.”

I took his hand. I squeezed. I prayed.

*Don’t take him. I need him.*

An unseen light filled the room around us. I recognized the feeling of James in the room with us. Behind him, around us, behind the bed Jacob laid in, I sensed an army of angels. There were no empty spaces.



I don’t think Sarah was alone. Maybe she had a handmaid, a servant, a friend. At the very least, I’m sure there was an angel near her, but not one making marks against her on a tablet of divine stone. No, this angel would be like the one sent to Christ when he faced his own deepest sorrow in Gethsemane. Christ doesn’t require people to stand on their own in a storm. He sends people to each of us, at different moments, to stand with us in our storms. We give up things and give away things not because God wants to leave us empty, but because another of his children needs to be filled.

As the same brightness filled the hospital room that once filled the room where I lost my child, I was surrounded by love. With Ryan’s hand in mine and Rebecca standing near, I saw the loops of a vast plan pulling us toward each other. Ryan had lost his spouse. Rebecca had lost her baby. Both had been present, were present, when I faced similar pains.

The ram that Abraham finds in the thicket after the angel appears to him is symbol of Christ. Empty tombs and missing things are sort of his specialty. He understands our limits, the spaces of darkness we will never be enough to bear on our own. Maybe the emptiness inside us makes room not only for him, but also the human saviors who come to us in his place. Through sacrifice, he gives us moments to experience for ourselves what he feels every time he provides the miracle we can’t create on our own.

That night, I slept beside Jacob in a reclining chair near his hospital bed. By the time morning came, I knew he would live.

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