

“‘God must hate me.’ If you’ve ever felt that way, I hope you’ll read Elizabeth Hagan’s beautiful new book. No one can read this book without also being helped to see their own story differently, and no less important, to empathize more deeply with all who suffer the grief of dreams long deferred or permanently denied. This is the kind of book you will always remember and be better for having read.” —Brian D. McLaren, Author/Activist

“With emotional depth and pastoral sensitivity, Elizabeth Hagan gives particular insight to the visceral longing for biological motherhood. Her story is instructive for people who are not aware of the trials of infertility, and it is hopeful as Hagan bears witness for the countless women and men who know those trials all too well.” —Carol Howard Merritt, Author of *Healing Spiritual Wounds*

“An utterly absorbing account of birthing—and allowing God to birth—compassion, pain, hope, solidarity, abundance, and lament. But not only those: in this birth story, what’s born is a richness in the spiritual life, and, ultimately, a self. (Which means that you needn’t be, or want to be, a mother, to find this book good, wise company.)” —Lauren F. Winner, Author of *Mudhouse Sabbath* and *Wearing God*

“Raw. Real. Funny. Honest. Hagan’s tale of hope amid infertility will delight readers with its accessibility and nourish them with thoughtful reflections on love, faith and family.” —MaryAnn McKibben Dana, Author of *Sabbath in the Suburbs*

“As a fellow infertile, I wish my wife and I had this book during our period of sorrow to provide language for our grief. I highly recommend this book to pastors, therapists, chaplains or anyone who is willing to be present with those who are suffering.” —Todd Maberry, Duke Divinity School

“Elizabeth Hagan speaks intimately and powerfully to all who have ever experienced the inability to fully realize a lifelong hope or heartfelt dream. . . . This book left me feeling refreshingly vulnerable and incredibly inspired!” —Allen V. Harris, Regional Minister for the Christian Church (Disciples Of Christ)

“*Birthed* is an unflinching, courageous, and much-needed portrait of what it means to wrestle faithfully with desire, death, and rebirth. By shying away from trite phrases and easy answers, *Birthed* invites us to reflect honestly and courageously on our own forays into the valley of the shadow of death. Yes, this is a story about one woman’s hard-fought struggle through infertility, but it is also a much-needed reminder that God’s Spirit is always making things new in us.” —Maria A. Kane, Rector, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Waldorf, Maryland

“In *Birthed*, Elizabeth Hagan opens her heart, describing with exquisite intimacy her excruciating feelings of biological failure, human disappointment, and divine abandonment. The reader looking for support while living through infertility will find a friend who understands, and the friend looking for ways to offer support will find answers in this warm and real account of the author’s attempts to have the baby she so dearly wants.” —Martha Spong, Executive Director, RevGalBlogPals, and Editor, *There’s a Woman in the Pulpit*

“*Birthed* moves infertility out of the shadows where shame, guilt and discomfort have lodged it for far too long and teaches us that giving voice to our deepest fears and pain is the only way for hope and possibility to take root and flourish.” —Edith Guffey, UCC Conference Minister, Kansas-Oklahoma

“Tired of the infertility taboo? Elizabeth lifts the veil with humor and raw emotion, guiding her reader through the journey of parenthood, interrupted.” —J. Dana Trent, Author of *Saffron Cross: The Unlikely Story of How a Christian Minister Married a Hindu Monk*

“Elizabeth speaks with honesty and integrity about the excruciating reality of infertility. But somehow, in spite of such, she magically and miraculously weaves (and lives) a story of surprising beauty and blessing. *Birthed* is a true and tender book that offers its readers the priceless gifts of redemption and hope; she honors and models the enduring capacity of a woman’s heart.” —Ronna Detrick, *Transforming Women’s Sacred Stories* blog

Birthed

FINDING **GRACE**
THROUGH
INFERTILITY

Elizabeth Hagan

Foreword by Amy K. Butler



ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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Laughter at the Wailing Wall

When a couple goes through infertility, it's not as if everything else stops. House chores, family, and professional obligations go on. For Kevin and me, remaining present in the “non-fertility-focused” world felt so challenging. We wanted to try, even though we wanted to spend every free moment with the covers over our heads.

When the calendar page turned to 2011, Kevin and I kept our commitment to attend a ten-day interfaith trip to Israel. We were to travel with other local clergy in conjunction with a local university. We'd leave the U.S. the day before Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and celebrate the holiday together in Israel, making a statement as Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders that people of all faiths could get along in spite of our obvious theological differences. The support and the excitement of the church leadership about this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity spurred me on. Our congregation, the local mosque, and the local synagogue had already made plans to meet together in shared learning upon our return.

When our itinerary arrived in the mail two days after New Year's, I read we'd go to the Western Wall on day two. I was immediately intrigued, remembering its significance from seminary studies. The Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, is the remaining segment of the second Jewish temple, built by Herod the Great. I knew this site drew Jews together from all over the world—to mourn, to pray, and most of all to hope for the future. I excelled at crying, so it sounded like my kind of place!

Around the dinner table later that evening, I shared with Kevin this good news: “Hon, we’re going to a wall of tears. Isn’t this great?” He nodded in affirmation, his way of saying back to me, “I’m glad you are excited about something.”

I’d read that a meaningful part of the experience for many included placing prayers in the cracks of the wall. In the weeks before we left—in response to our invitation—countless friends and church members had given us prayers rolled up in small pieces of paper to take with us to the Wall. Why not make this stop on our trip a communal exercise? Though I hadn’t opened any out of respect for confidentiality, I knew some of the prayers were about unruly teenage children from frazzled single mothers. I knew some requests hoped for healing from cancer. I knew some prayers were pleas for unemployed family members to find jobs. You don’t go to the Wall with just any prayer, it seemed. Tremendous burdens resided in these fragments of paper.

But, what about me? Would I take a prayer? In my moments of quiet reflection as I thought about all the sorrow of the past year, as well as the latest string of friends who had made social media declarations of motherhood, I knew I needed to write my own prayer. No ordinary prayer would do. I began drafting with my mind made up. I’d go to Israel prepared.

Upon arrival, in preparation for our first full day of traveling in Jerusalem’s old city, our tour guide, Aziz, took me aside. He explained that as the only female in the group, I’d be alone during our prayers at the Wall. “Men are on one side and women are on the other. It’s the Orthodox way.”

I assumed I would meet the segregation of the Wailing Wall with frustration, hurt, and annoyance. “Why can’t I go pray with the men, especially with my husband?” I wanted to scream. I am a feminist, after all. I believe my self-worth is no less than any man’s.

However, as I walked into the temple court and around the metal dividers that directed me to the women’s side, I found tears welling up in my eyes for a completely different reason.

Right away, I felt at home. I was glad to be surrounded only by fellow females, my sisters in humanity.

Taking a few deep breaths, aware of each step bringing me closer to the Wall, there was something incredibly holy that came over me as I surrendered to whatever the experience could offer. Though seemingly just a bunch of old rocks, I knew these were the stones that told the story of the faith tradition that gave my spirit life. I knew that thousands upon thousands of pilgrims like me had entered this Plaza with heavy hopes on their shoulders—in sadness for what might have been, bearing prayers for the nation of Israel, or carrying great requests: problems too big for human hands to hold any longer.

The space felt incredibly safe and inviting, even though I was a Christian pastor dressed in jeans and a beige sweater under a heavy black and white checkered overcoat, no prayer book in my grasp. No chants in Hebrew (Baptists could opt out of this class at my seminary) would come from my mouth. Instead, I attended to the task at hand. I pulled the rustling strips of prayers out of my coat's front pocket. And then I found mine buried under my water bottle at the bottom of my oversized pink purse. Folding it over several times, as if I was making origami, I wedged it into the wall the best I could without ripping the sheet of paper. My soul lay open between the rocks:

I am a Mother.

Yet in my house there are no stray toys rolling around on the floor. There are no sippy cups with apple juice residue piled up by the sink. There are no schedules of what child goes where and when on our refrigerator. There are no school papers stacked on our kitchen table or science project parts strewn across our countertops.

I am not identified in any communities of mothers. I am not invited to forums of mothers who work outside the home. I've never read What to Expect When You Are Expecting, or gone to a play group with girlfriends and their kids. I cringe when I am asked by strangers: "How many kids do you have?" Why? Because I always have to say, "I have none."

Rather, my home life is as adult-centered as it comes. Almost never do you find my husband and me sitting at the kitchen table at mealtimes. You wouldn't find child-protective devices on our electrical outlets or wine cabinet doors, nor do we sketch out our weekend activities around nap times or soccer games. And there are empty rooms in our home, two of them. Though we've planned big, it is still just the two of us.

But, I am a Mother. I have children...

...But no one sees them. There are those who have dwelled within me, but decided to take a short, in fact very short, stay. And I wouldn't have known about them either, except for the signs that pointed to their dwelling. My body spoke of them through exhaustion, nausea, and cravings of unusual foods. Something new had found its way into me, and my heart counted the days and yearned for them to stay, even—just even—for one more day. I loved them, each one of them.

And when they were gone, making their way out of me like a disgruntled houseguest, I wept. I cried tears so big they ran from my cheeks to my navel. They poured like an upstream river out of my being. I didn't know when or if the intense pain would ever stop. I couldn't believe that such a good gift could be so cruelly taken so soon. Yet, these children were never gone from my heart. I was still their Mother.

Yet, there remain in this time and space children of mine who I do not mother alone. Some have blonde hair, some have dark skin; some are very young, and others are much older than me in years but alone in their own way. Each is searching for spaces in this crazy world to call their own and for someone to recognize who they really are. They cry out and, even though my own pain sings a loud song, I do hear them. It is my honor to see them. I fiercely want to protect them from any more of life's deepest pains. I love them and weep for them too—not because their life has gone from me, rather because it has come and stayed close. They have come into my heart and they are now part of me too. Our bond is undeniably good.

So, no, I may never be able to attend the innocence of the average baby shower with other mothers-to-be, or be invited to a mother's

support group, or even be able to talk fully about my mothering pain and joy in public. I am learning to accept that the gift of mothering I have been given may never be understood by most. And I might never know what physical life coming from my womb is like. Such is the cost of unconventional motherhood: loneliness.

Yet, no matter how I feel or what others say or even what the future may hold for me, there is one thing I know: I am, and will always be, a mother.

As I emptied my soul of these words, a great sense of relief came over me. Though my instinct was to take the prayer out of the wall and cherish my words again, I just couldn't. The prayer sat in the cracks of the Wall. It was no longer my burden to carry. My worries belonged to God.

Soon after this prayer surrendering process, I felt a strong need to cover my head with the floral red scarf I'd brought along while I sat in one of the white plastic chairs close to the wall. There was no official who asked me to cover my head, as had been the case with the site we visited the day before, but it seemed like the right thing to do. To cover my head allowed me to take in what being at a site full of so many hopes, so many sorrows, and so many worries meant for generations before me right then at that very moment.

As I looked with tears rolling down my cheeks at the crowd of my sisters that surrounded me, I was truly glad that no men were present. Maybe someone was crying tears from a font similar to mine? Who knows? There are unique sorrows in what it means to be a woman, and it felt right to be able to grieve alongside those who could understand me the most.

I saw an African woman kneeling, leaning toward the wall, praying with a rosary. I saw a Euro-American woman kissing the wall as if it were her long-lost lover. I observed a woman with Down syndrome embracing a teenage traveling companion, so overcome by sadness that she could hardly stand, weeping into her arms. I saw a Jewish woman, prayer book in hand, rocking back and forth with more devotion toward a holy book than I've ever seen by my peers toward any Christian text.

And I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay and cry and cry and truly invite any sadness in me to come out and be gone. I was tired of it. Yet the longer I sat in the chair, the more I felt the Spirit saying to me, "Get up. Go in peace. You've grieved enough."

I walked out into the courtyard to find Kevin and the others. Right away, Kevin noticed: "There's something different about you. Are you okay?"

I was more than okay. Spontaneously, I started humming the song "Peace like a River," for which I'd learned motions as a child. In an instant, where tears had flowed minutes earlier, calm warmed my weary bones. Soon my steps felt lighter. Back in the van, I talked with my colleagues, fully engaged in the expectation of the journey ahead. The words "peace sacrament" rose to my lips. I knew God have given me peace at that wall as a sacrament, a means of grace. But, what's that? Baptists as a whole, after all, don't even claim the word *sacrament*. We talk instead about ordinances, and there are only two of them: baptism and the Lord's supper. So, then, how in the world could I begin to talk about the Holy I had encountered at the Wall? It didn't really matter, I realized; it just *was*.

As the trip continued, we ate our way through the nation. I learned that in Israel hospitality exists as a supreme virtue, much like the rest of the Middle East. In particular, dinners in Israel (and most lunches, for that matter) were long affairs. Abundant bread, hummus, and cheese filled the long tables. We'd clean our plates only to find them filled up again. As we ate together as a group, conversation with one another became our entertainment. Aziz and our other guide, Elad, told us tales of their adventures as peacemakers during times of war, while the rest of us sipped on wine. We breathed in the slower pace of life in this country.

Any time the American rabbi in our delegation chimed in on the conversation with an anecdote of some kind, I couldn't help but giggle. His sarcastic humor was just my style. And, even before the story's punch line, I belly laughed in response. My laughter became contagious. Night after night I erupted

in laughter and the rest of the restaurant followed. The group started to anticipate it and look forward to its arrival. I became known as “The Laughing Reverend.” I was unstoppable! From sullen girl on the couch to the life of the party in Israel—things just kept getting stranger and stranger.

I recognized for the first time, after all of those sermons I’d heard on her, why Sarah laughed when God told her she’d have a baby. Laughter can be a response to surprise or disbelief, yes, but it can also just be comfort in your own skin.

Most of all, I knew this: the spiritual rocks in my soul had moved. The wind of the Spirit was blowing within me, and, for the first time in months, my feet stood on fertile ground. I was coming home to earth again, for even though nothing about our dreadful situation had seemed to change, at least according to our medical files, something had changed in me.