

Covenant Word

Birthed

The title is borrowed from Elizabeth Evans Hagan's book *Birthed*
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
June 18, 2017*

She had experienced five miscarriages and wondered why she was having trouble moving ahead with her life. Her doctor's only explanation was "These things happen." Her husband was lost trying to hold their lives together. Her parents and friends didn't know what to say anymore and when they tried, her emotional response was too painful to endure. You see, there are no public rites, no culturally accepted traditions for losses like this. Nobody brings a casserole. Hallmark doesn't have appropriate cards. There are no special days of remembrance. No, these things are only whispered about. If this woman was ever going to move ahead, we had to develop a way to recognize her grief in an appropriate manner.

Imagine God making a promise to you and you come to realize no matter how willing you are to serve, that you are incapable of fulfilling your end of the bargain for reasons beyond your control.

So, one Sunday after worship attenders had cleared the sanctuary, this wife, husband and myself closed the doors. We taped notes on the doors that read, "Private Service in Session," and we came to the front of the sanctuary. The communion table had been pulled out. Six candles were lit. I read the passage about Jesus welcoming the children and said that in my heart and soul, I knew that Jesus was caring for the children this couple had lost. Quietly, she picked up a snuffer. As she said the names of each child, she extinguished the light of five candles. When she got to the sixth, however, I stopped her saying that this was the Light of the World that keeps healing and hope alive when we cannot. Then I told her the story of Abraham and Sarah.

You will remember that God had pulled Abram aside to tell him that he had been chosen to be the Father from whom nations would come. In chapters 12 and 13 of Genesis, Abram points out the obvious to God, "How can I be the

father of the nations when I remain childless?" This is when God directs Abram's attention to the stars. Only then did Abram grasp the full promise of God.

By chapter 16, Sarai decides to take control of the situation. When everything in your life feels out of control, don't you find yourself grasping for control in any way that you can get it? This covenant Abraham made with God is all well and good, but it involves Sarai who is given no voice. She must be able to conceive a child, but she is barren. Imagine God making a promise to you and you come to realize no matter how willing you are to serve, that you are incapable of fulfilling your end of the bargain for reasons beyond your control. God appears to be a cruel joker to make such an agreement. And Sarai, can you imagine her disappointment month after month after month?

Elizabeth Hagan's story may help us here. After years of monitoring her 28 day cycle and still not successful in pregnancy, her doctor told her she was a perfect candidate for invitro

fertilization. So Elizabeth and her husband, Kevin, began the daily ritual of arriving at the infertility clinic every morning between 7 and 9 to check-in with the doctor. She says in her book, *Birthed*, "I tolerated bruises on my arm from all the blood draws. My every morning routine became that of lying on a table with [my feet in stirrups]." She speaks of sitting in the waiting room full of baby-making hopefuls and of loving (and hating) all of the "success-story" baby pictures that were attached to the bulletin boards up and down the office halls. The day came when the doctor said her sonogram looked great and that a nurse would call with instructions for an egg retrieval.

Later that day, the nurse did call, but the news was not what Elizabeth was prepared to hear. Her hormone levels were too high. The retrieval could not take place. The nurse said it was "bad luck" and quickly got off the phone. Her feet limp, Elizabeth fell to the ground. Her whimpers transitioned to full sobs. All she could think was: "This is it! I am done [with] being brave. If all

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



Baptist Church of the
Covenant
Where Faith Comes to Life

2117 University Boulevard
Birmingham, AL 35233-3188

205-328-0644
FAX 205-328-6060

Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

these months of invasive testing and waiting and preparations only end this way, then I am through!”

Don't you know that Sarai had reached the point where her feet went limp. Falling to the ground, racked with sobs, did she think: “This is it! I am done! If all these months of trying and waiting only end this way, then I am through!” After all, her husband has been chosen by God to be the father of generations, the irony that she is incapable of providing the

heir to fulfill the covenant is too much. Unlike the birth narratives of Jesus, there is no Holy Spirit visiting in the tents of Cana. If there is to be an heir, it is up to the old fashioned methods of procreation. So tired of the whispers and innuendos of the community in which she lived, tired of the constant failure to conceive, tired, just plain tired – Sarai was in her nineties!! – Sarai takes control and provides a way for Abram to have his heir. Proving that she is capable of being a covenantal partner with her husband, Sarai devises a plan in which she gives Abram an Egyptian servant, Hagar, with whom to fulfill the promise.

But in the very next chapter, chapter 17, God visits Abram again. Again, God reminds Abram that they are in covenant, and that he will be exceedingly fruitful. This time, however, God speaks specifically of how it will happen and God speaks of Sarah's role in the promise: “I will bless Sarah, and moreover, I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Abraham's response is what I love: he falls on his face and laughs! We enjoy poking a stick at Sarah when she laughs, but Abraham laughs first. Don't you know that he laughs at the

And Sarah, still laughing to herself, gives the whole thing a blessing that speaks to the resolution that is in her spirit at last.

sheer relief of it all...at last, the exoneration and exultation of his beloved, Sarah. At last, she can be the mother she has longed to be and just maybe, at last, all that bitterness and resentment that has grown between them will dissolve. At last, there will be the fulfillment of a promise that has made Abraham look foolish all these years. At last, they will not be dreaming about the truth, but living in the certainty of the truth. At last, a son, a heir, a child that will be theirs together. As reality settles in, Abraham asks the obvious: “How can this be? I am 100 and Sarah is 90. How can this happen?” And God just gives reassurance that it will be so.

These tales about Sarah and Abraham have me wondering about the times in our own lives when we have felt that God let us down...made us promises that were impossible, but then, in our most desperate, desolate, disconcerting places, place of barrenness, God gives birth to something through us that is beyond our wildest imaginations.

Then, today's passage, chapter 18... after six chapters of promises and after years of waiting, the Lord appears at their campsite under the oak trees of Mamre. Abraham's hospitality is effusive. Sarah prepares, never asking a question. The strangers, however, ask about her, and the narrator is kind enough to tell us that Sarah is hiding behind the tent door so that she can

hear what is being said. When she hears the promise that she will give birth to a son, she carefully laughs to herself. It is not the full out, fall on your face laugh of Abraham. She laughs to herself and wonders, “How can this be since I am old? How can this be since Abraham is old? We can't even give one another pleasure any more!” The guest promises a visit for the following Spring to make it so.

Two chapters later, a baby boy is finally born. Isaac is his name. Isaac means laughter. And Sarah, still laughing to herself, gives the whole thing a blessing that speaks to the resolution that is in her spirit at last. She says: “God made this laughter for me. Here I have given Abraham a son in his old age so that all who hear about it will laugh with me.”

Now I have presented this story as if it were about one woman and one man. I believe, however, that the stories of scripture are always about all men and all women and our journey to be in relationship to God. So read in this light, these tales about Sarah and Abraham have me wondering about the times in our own lives when we have felt that God let us down...made us promises that were impossible, but then, in our most desperate, desolate, disconcerting places, place of barrenness, God gives birth to something through us that is beyond our wildest imaginations.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, suggests that the most important question we can ask ourselves as individual people of faith as well as a congregation is: “Will our faith have children?” (*Hope Within History*, quoted by Dana Ferguson in “Parenting Hope” Fourth Presbyterian Church, 6-16-02) The most precious gift of the household of God is faith. Faith has been entrusted to us to nurture so that everyone of us, regardless of our marital status, regardless of our physical ability to procreate, is a parent of faith and hope, compassion and hospitality, belief and possibility. Faith, Bruggemann says, will give birth to faith in others when we open our hearts and souls to the possibilities God has in store.

And so we dare to light a candle against the dark suffering of miscarriage; we hold the hands of the grieving; we are supportive presence when couples call it quits; we become sources of encouragement when dreams die or promises appear to be broken. At these barren places, our faith

produces offspring. Because of the faith of one, others can have faith too.

The history of Baptist Church

of the Covenant is rich with stories of barrenness and promising birth. Beginning in controversy over who was eligible for membership, the conversation quickly became a part of the defining civil rights movement occurring not just in Birmingham but all over the world. In 1968, First Baptist Church adopted a series of commitments that included: "...we invite all who will, whether they be young or old, proud or plain, rich or poor, to partake with us of the love of God and to give themselves to the task that is before us." It was an invitation to give birth to faith for whoever wanted to be a part. And so, as most of you know, when it became apparent that all were not invited nor welcomed, a group left the barren halls of First Baptist Church in order to give birth to Baptist Church of the Covenant.

I admit that I have never been able to imagine the outright hostility that created the barrenness from which you gave birth to a new thing...that is, until recently. Jean Thomason placed in my hands a copy of an article that appeared in *The Washington Post* on November 8, 1970. It is written by Betty Medsger, and she quotes a deacon of First church: "My wife and five other women of the church worked around the clock in July to call every member on the rolls. If they believed in the 1968 commitments, we never called them again. This way, in the end we had 450 votes that we could command at any time." He continues with reference to the Company of the Committed: "The one big difference

between us and them is that they had 20 n-word* in church, and we had none. And we're going to keep it that way. Come to First Baptist Sunday for good gospel preaching, good singing and no n-word.*" He then proudly tells how he changed all the locks on the doors of the church so that no staff member could get back into the building. Why? "Because we don't trust them. They might come back and steal the music and the handbells." (*The quotes in the paper included "niggers.")

I'm going to chase one small rabbit here. This same man, a deacon of obvious righteousness, (eye roll) also says to *The Washington Post* reporter that he closed the small coffee house, named The CrossRoads, which had begun as a ministry of the church to the neighborhood. "We had to close it. Too many colored people live near that block. It's cheap coffee. They'll all come in if we don't close it." Then he points out that the coffee house was in a building that "when we first

owned it was a pretty good night club with a nice strip-tease." HOW DID HE KNOW????

Listening to

such comments, living with such attitudes, I think it is a miracle that you did not feel your feet go limp. That you did not fall to the ground, racked with sobs, and think: "This is it! I am done! If all these months of trying and waiting only end this way, then I am through!" Instead you found ways to keep giving birth to faith.

Perhaps it was words like those spoken by Wilson Fallin that kept you moving forward. Fallin was a local black pastor at that time. He said: "I'm impressed with their (referring to the Company of the Committed) sensitivity. I think it's good that a group is trying to be a real church. But, I don't think their action will have much impact on giving blacks, poor whites, and other minorities much power...unless they give up some of their own money and power to bring justice to the poor. We will have to wait to see what they are willing to do; to see if they're willing to keep moving [forward; to see if from their turmoil, they can give birth to faith.]"

I believe that these last 46 years have validated Fallin's prophetic challenge. We still receive anyone who desires to worship Jesus Christ into our midst. We are both welcoming and affirming. We place into leadership persons who are qualified and willing, not because of their skin color, gender or sexual identity. 14% of the annual budget and 4% of our designated accounts are used locally and around the world to give birth to faith. And this

summer alone, we are sending 20 youth and 20 children to Passport Camps in the hopes that they will hear their promise from God. Five have just returned from Uganda and 12 will go to Cuba in just a few weeks. We will welcome the homeless through Family Promise into our facilities and we are packing back packs with food for children experiencing food scarcity in their homes.

We don't have an Isaac, but we have an Eli, and a Teddy and a Finley Claire. We have a Gus and a Hudson and a Maci. We share laughter with Richard and Katie, Deason and Mollie, with Ashli, Gena, and Dudley Fortune. And we anticipate laughing with, oh, so many others. Our faith is giving birth to those who are seeking the possibility of personal belief in Jesus Christ. My

prayer is that we will continue to listen at the door in order to hear God's call. And as we faithfully conceive, may our faith continue to give birth to joy and peace, and most of all, faith and laughter. May it be so. Oh, may it be so, Amen.

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