

Title: "Sarah who longed"
Date: February 14, 2021
Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15
Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

For the past 38 days we have been going through a sermon series looking at Biblical figures that have gone through difficult days. As this season between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday ends this week, we will have spent 40 days journeying with the lives of individuals who faced difficult challenges during difficult days.

As a minister and a person who spends a lot of time in the scriptures, the number 40 instantly calls to mind a great deal of memorable moments in the scriptures. For example, God made it rain forty days and nights during the flood and Jesus spent forty days fasting in the wilderness. There's something appropriate about our church spending forty days learning about these figures who have had seasons of challenge and difficulty.

Today, we have one last moment with these figures before we enter into another celebration with forty days. Before we shift into the season of Lent, our figure teaches us a few important lessons about traveling through seasons of difficulty. She is a figure who goes through a lot of struggles with her husband Abraham. Abraham is a nomadic figure, so she wanders with her partner. During her journey she faced two periods where she was taken into a ruler's home because they think she is single.¹ During the journey we are told that her nephew ended up in trouble several times and at one point her husband and all of his armed men went charging after an army to rescue the nephew while Sarah presumably stayed behind.²

On top of all of the external drama of their life together, we learn at one point that the relationship between Sarah and Abraham was complicated after Abraham had a child with Sarah's slave after Sarah insisted that Abraham take the slave Hagar as his wife. Abraham received Hagar as a spouse but still told Sarah that Hagar was still her servant and slave. To say that the relationship between Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham is very odd to us today is a very large understatement. While there are certainly conversations that can be had around the concept of surrogacy, the story of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham is not a good model for our behavior.³

Even as we find Sarah today, Sarah's story is a bit of a sad story. Abraham is entertaining three strangers who have come to speak for God. As Abraham entertained the guests in the shade, an old prophecy was reiterated: Sarah shall bear Abraham a child.

Apparently Sarah laughed incredulously at this idea. Would she really have a child in her old age? Really? What's worse than the fact that she was caught in her laughter is the fact that

¹ Genesis 12, 20

² Genesis 14

³ Genesis 16

Abraham was questioned about Sarah's laughter as God apparently talked about Sarah as if she was not right there behind the curtain of the tent. When Sarah denied laughing, the angel of the Lord finally spoke right to her. Effectively, God calls out her laughter and her lying about the laughter.

We have already mentioned the fact that Abraham and Sarah have a long relationship by this point in the story. Like any married couple that I have met, they have accumulated their stories over the years. There's some part of me that truly looks at this story and cringes for one reason: Abraham and Sarah are human.

Now, I thought long and hard about an example that makes me look bad as an individual because I do not want to embarrass my partner, friend, and spouse Kayti. I needed an example of this marital challenge that squarely makes me look like a heel, so I had to find an example of me being a bit of a jerk.

Several years ago at thanksgiving, my wife made the turkey. While I enjoy making the turkey, that year she thawed the turkey, cooked the turkey, and handed it over to be carved because neither of us likes carving, so you have to carve the turkey in our house if you didn't cook it. As I carved the turkey I noticed that there was something papery in the bird. I poked, prodded, and found a little bag of turkey bits that she forgot to remove before cooking. She'd checked one end of the turkey for the neck but not the other.

Now, you may think to yourself that it is a minor mistake and you would be right. Nothing was harmed, nothing was ruined, and it was something that could be laughed about and forgotten.

Did I let it go? Oh no. I put a reminder in my phone for a week before Thanksgiving and I kid you not: I waited 358 days for my phone to remind me to tell my wife that the turkey bits are in the other end of the turkey. What's worse is that I put it on an annual reminder so that I wouldn't forget to joke about it the next year.

The reminder kept recurring every year. Thankfully, after a year or two I had the good common sense to stop picking on my wife, but I still chuckled every November when the reminder came up. I finally removed the reminder a year or two ago after finally realizing that it wasn't funny and I had to let it go.

I tell you that story for a reason: I cannot help but read that story and think that there is a prime example of Sarah having a rough moment and nobody ever forgetting about it. If we take the book of Genesis as seriously as some people do in terms of being historically accurate, it is possible that we are participating in remembering a difficult moment in Sarah's life thousands and thousands of years after it happened. If we take it as serious literature, then the story of the lives of Abraham and Sarah without repeating this embarrassing moment. If Sarah were at our Thanksgiving table, we very well might tell the story of that one time Sarah laughed in God's face and then tried to hide it.

Let's be clear about one thing: we are not reading Sarah's story today to chide her on a lack of faith or to praise Abraham for having faith instead of laughing. We are reading Sarah's story because of two truths that are important for us and we're going to look at those truths mashed together: First, Sarah's situation was a difficult situation that was worthy of compassion. Second, we need to note that this difficult moment is not the end of Sarah's story.

As far as compassion goes, Sarah's story and those like it may deserve a little more compassion than we often grant them. Consider another figure who is given a similarly hard time. We look at the apostle Thomas. Thomas did not see Jesus for a week after he rose from the grave. Everyone said Jesus had risen from the dead, but Thomas was still wondering if Jesus really rose from the grave until he saw Jesus face to face. For a healthy amount of skepticism, we historically have renamed him Doubting Thomas for being surprised that Jesus rose from the grave despite the fact that few if any of us have ever met some that has risen from the dead after days in the grave.⁴

We similarly look at Peter and join with Jesus when he calls him a person of little faith when he has doubts after stepping out of a boat and walking on water with Jesus in the middle of a storm. Peter has the audacity to step out of a boat and begin to walk on water, but we shake our head at Peter for having "little faith." I've never stepped out of a boat to walk on the surface of a lake in the middle of a raging storm. Have you? Who are we to be hard on Peter?⁵

We can be really hard on Biblical figures for doing the very things that we might do in their shoes. We might look at Sarah and say that she has little faith. We might look at Sarah and snicker at her laughter, but have you had a child at 90 years of age? I'm approaching 40 and there are days that chasing a toddler, a preteen, and a teenager around can be exhausting.

The whole situation makes me ask a self-reflective question: Am I seriously going to make fun of a 90 year old for laughing at the idea of beginning the process of chasing a kid around as a nonagenarian? Are you? If I were a swearing man, I would use stronger language than this when I say:

"No. I'm not going to make fun of a 90 year old for laughing at the idea of having a kid. When I'm 90, you will be lucky if I am willing to babysit my descendants' kids for more than an hour without a previously arranged guaranteed naptime and by that I mean a naptime for me—the kid is on their own for naps."

Sarah has had a long journey and Sarah's journey is far from over. As we have already noted, Sarah is taken into a ruler's house twice when a ruler thinks she is eligible for marriage and single. We didn't mention it, but one of those times occurs after our story today. Yup, there was a king who was all about taking Sarah into his house decades after what we would call

⁴ John 20

⁵ Matthew 14

mandatory retirement age. After eventually having a child, Sarah will learn one day that her husband almost sacrificed him on an altar to God as a helpless child. Sarah's headaches are just beginning.

When we look at all of what Sarah goes through, there's nothing wrong with looking at this story and having compassion. What's more, there's nothing wrong with realizing that the challenges we face in our lives may just be beginning. Life comes with ups and downs. There are days of laughter and days of tears, days of celebration and days of sorrow... life is inherently a difficult journey.

If you are having a rough time or have a moment where you realize that the future is going to be tough, I invite you to remember that life has ups and downs. It is okay to not only have compassion for people like Sarah, but to have compassion for yourself and others. Provided you are listening to this sermon today or are reading this sometime in early 2021, you know that we have gone through a rough patch as a species over the last year. If you are American, then you know that the political nature of the past few years and especially recently has been extremely rocky.

Things have been difficult and it is okay to admit that you may wish to laugh when I say the following words: "In the end, it is going to be alright. As Christians, we believe that God will set things right at the end of things, so if it isn't right, it isn't the end." To put it in the words of Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

It might make you want to laugh to think of everything getting back to a place where it is alright, but one of our core beliefs as Christians is that the life that we are living right now is not all there is to life. We believe God will redeem things, so if things have not been redeemed, then things have not finished.

If you think of things being okay one day and want to laugh incredulously, I have to be honest: I'm not going to judge you. I want to laugh like Sarah sometimes too. I will simply say that if you will have compassion for me, I will have compassion for you, and together we can be grateful that God's compassion is greater than we can imagine.

I want to end our time together today with a prayer. Let me preface the prayer with a statement about where we move as a community from today.

On Wednesday of this week we will enter the season of Lent. Lent is a season of honest reflection. If you are at a point where you know you need a healthy dose of self-compassion, I invite you to begin the honest reflection of Lent with the understanding that you may have a reasonable and true need for self-compassion. If you are in that place of needing self-compassion, I invite you to join me in the following prayer. If you are not in that place, you can still pray with us as we transition:

Holy God, I sometimes want to laugh like Sarah. I sometimes join all the people who have doubts, have fears, or who have an active and lively skeptical side. I sometimes want to laugh like Sarah. Sometimes, I just want to admit to myself that I have difficulties and I have doubts.

Your love covers me, Your love surrounds me, enfolds me, and imbues me with grace. There is nothing that can separate me from your love in Christ Jesus: not even my occasional laughter and my moments of doubt.

Give me what I need today including a healthy understanding of Your compassion as well as my need for self-compassion. Help me to hear the call to “love my neighbor as myself” as a call both to love my neighbor and to love myself.⁶ Bless me and guide me in Your wisdom. Amen.

⁶ To be clear, if you are doubting that it is Biblical to consider the importance of the relationship between self-love and love of neighbor, here are the passages that reference this idea directly: Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19, Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31-33, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9-10, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8