

“Sarah”

Sermon by Rev. Colie Bettivia

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In Genesis 12 we hear God’s first promise to Abraham:

12 Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Abram was already 75 years old.

He and his family pack up and move to follow God’s instruction.

After a little while though, there was a famine, and Abram and his family go down to Egypt in search of a better life. Abram gets worried that he will be killed because Sarai is just so beautiful, and so he passes her off as his sister. Sarai gets taken into Pharaoh’s house as a concubine, and Abram is “rewarded” with great riches. But soon plagues come to Egypt, the pharaoh realizes what is happening, and sends Abram and Sarai out of Egypt.

Soon then we hear God’s promise to Abram restated: ¹⁴ The LORD said to Abram...

“Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; ¹⁵ for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷ Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”

Some time passes, and Abram still has not had any children. And so he begins to question God --- God, you said I would have offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth, and yet I have no children - one of my servants is set to be my heir. So God responds by promising again to Abram -- Go outside, look up and count the stars - so shall your descendants be. And we are told that Abram trusted God’s promise.

But again, more time passes, and still no children. 10 years go by. 10 years.... Finally, Sarai takes matters into her own hands with a different idea -- she offers to her husband the use of her slave-girl, Hagar, that he might have children through her. And sure enough, Hagar gets pregnant, and this seems to drive a wedge of anger and jealousy between Sarai and Hagar. Hagar is briefly thrown out of the house and into the

wilderness, where God attends to her and promises to her countless descendants. So Hagar returns to Abram and Sarai's house, and Abram's first son, Ishmael, is born. Abram, we are told, is 86 years old when Ishmael is born.

Another 13 years pass. Abram, 99 years old, is visited again by God. God changes Abram's name from Abram to Abraham -- which means 'father of nations'. God reiterates the promise -- not only will Abraham have descendants, but they will be born of his wife, Sarai, who is now 90 years old, will be called Sarah.

Very soon after that, Abraham and Sarah are visited by 3 visitors -- strangers who are not just people, the story tells us, but messengers from God.

Listen.....

18:1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. 9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" 13 The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" 14 Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

21:1 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. 2 Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears

will laugh with me." 7 And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

I wonder about Sarah, and I worry about her. For as much as she is vital to this whole story, from way back nearly 25 years ago when God first came to Abram, over all that time, Sarah is not heard speaking much more than a few words. Decisions are made for her, from the big things like now you must live as a wife to the Pharaoh, to little things like Abraham saying 'take this flour and make bread for me and my visitors.'

I wonder about Sarah, and I worry about her. Her long struggle to have a baby seems to not only have caused her pain, but also driven distance between her and Abraham. The divine visitors point this out by asking Abraham a seemingly simple question: "Where is your wife Sarah?" Earlier in the stories of Genesis, similar questions are raised by God to expose not physical location but distance in relationships. When Adam and Eve are hiding in the garden, having disobeyed God's command not to eat the one fruit, God asks "Where are you?" After Cain has killed his brother Able, God asks Cain, "Where is your brother?" When Hagar is in the wilderness, having run from Sarah's rage, God asks, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" All of these questions are not about location, but about relationship. When things go wrong in our lives, when we live with stress or disappointment or grief or despair, humans have a tendency to put emotional distance between ourselves and others, pushing others away from us - even pushing God away from us.

Recently, I was talking to a friend of mine who has been struggling to get pregnant for years. She has had two early miscarriages along the way, and lots and lots of negative pregnancy test. And what she told me is this:

“I am angry, and I am tired. That first day of the month when I realize I am not pregnant--- that first day I spend crying on the couch as much as I can, raging at the unfairness of it all to God, [wishing, perhaps that God was more like Santa Claus, whose rewards and punishments we can predict]. When people ask, "So when are you going to have a baby?" I want to stop answering, "well, I want to [work on my career] first," or "oh, I haven't gotten rid of that pesky travel bug yet" and just say, "I'm not sure I can," giving them a glimpse of the disappointment I face month after month as I ask myself the same question. Except I don't want pity or to hear remarks like, "stop being so negative," either.

Because the next day, the day after the crying and the raging, I get up, take a breath, and remember a God who does not open and close wombs based on some kind of a reward system, who does not work on my schedule or anyone else's for that matter [*and*] who does not require my pain to teach me a lesson either..... Instead, I reach out to a God who was crying and raging with me just the day before on that couch. I lean on a God who is lending me the strength now to try to find the abundance even in the emptiness. I turn to a God who is showing me how to create family in a different way.”

Even if you do not directly know the grief of infertility, all of us know of life's pain and disappointments that can push distance between ourselves and others, or ourselves and God. Sometimes, our bodies just don't work the way we want them to. Sometimes, life just doesn't line up the way we would design for ourselves. I do not believe that this is punishment from God for past sins, nor do I believe that God is manipulating the situation simply to “teach us something.” What I do believe is that God is there with us, in the midst of our pain and wondering ‘why me?’ and our uncertainty of what to do next. Our God who took on flesh to walk this earth beside us, who knows both the physical pain of life on earth and the emotional pain of broken relationships. God is with us, in the midst of this broken world. And the miracle of God's presence is not that the things we want will magically happen, but rather that God can take the pain and the hardship of this world and bring good out of them. God takes the shadow parts of our lives and shines a light in. God takes the death we carry within us, and brings out life again.

As the psalmist says, God can take our mourning and turn it into dancing. As Sarah would say, God can take our tears and anger and turn it into laughter and joy.