

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Genesis 16-17 *Mothers of Nations*

To look at "*women of faith in the Old Testament*," I suppose we should start with Eve, "the mother of all living," but we know so little about her as a person that there is not much to say. But a "daughter of Eve" named Sarai – later Sarah – is the first woman of whom we learn a lot.

1) *The Princess*

The LORD says of Sarai, "I will bless her so she will become *the mother of nations*" (17:16). That is a remarkable promise, given that the very first thing we learn about Sarai is that she is barren and has no children (11:30) – a fact that will shape the whole arc of her life, her dealings with her husband, her faith, her dealings with God. Infertility, for a woman, especially in the ancient world, could do that – and still does.

Like Abram her husband, Sarai came from Ur of the Chaldees – near Basra in modern Iraq – and with Terah the family patriarch, left there at God's instruction to travel to Canaan. Sarai's name is an ancient Semitic one that can mean "princess," or even "priestess" or "goddess" – not that she was one in fact, but in a strange way, being called "princess" in the Biblical narrative carries something of the same ambiguity that being called a "princess" does in our culture today!

But we have to place her in her culture, which was "patriarchal" in two senses of the word: the era when God was calling and making a people for himself through a line of "patriarchs" – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – and an era of unquestioned male domination. So Sarai "belongs" to Abram almost as much as his cattle and sheep do; and Genesis tells of two infamous occasions when he used her like an object he owned. Both of those arose because of one of her characteristics: she was a beautiful woman (an asset and a liability in the ancient world, as I imagine it is today) – so beautiful that Abram apparently lived in fear that he would be killed by more powerful men who wanted Sarai!

So not many years after Abram, Sarai, Abram's nephew Lot, their families and flocks and herds have settled in Canaan, a famine in the region drives them to Egypt in search of food. On arrival, Abram tells Sarai he will present her as his *sister* and not his wife, hoping to protect himself at her expense! Of course the story develops as expected: Sarai is soon noticed, brought into the Pharaoh's harem, and Abram prospers. But a plague descends on Pharaoh and his household, and it is revealed to him that it is because he is having sexual relations with Abram's wife. Abram and Sarai are ejected from Egypt, and return to Canaan much wealthier than they set out. The Biblical writer nowhere suggests that God smiles on all this! – on the contrary, it is one of the great mistakes for which Abram's people will pay heavily in due course.

2) God's Promise

Beautiful as Sarai is, she is still – in her own estimation and that of everyone else – a failure as a woman: she is childless. Worse, she is getting old. Now here we have to consider the great life-spans of these generations – Abram and Sarai are said to live 125-175 years. They were apparently still active in their 90s, and one commentator sensibly suggests that we shall understand the narratives better if we shrink their life-spans to our 75-85 years. So at the crucial moment when God renames 90-year-old Abram as *Abraham* – “father of nations” – and Sarai as *Sarah*, we should probably think of them as a couple in their 60s – still enough to tell us why they both laughed at God's promise of a child!

But God is very clear about his promise, and repeats it several times. He makes a covenant with Abraham, tells him he will become father of a great nation which will inherit the land of Canaan as their home, and that the LORD will bless them and make them a blessing to all nations.

There's only one problem, of course: Abraham and Sarah still have no son. So Sarah makes her move. They have been 10 years already in Canaan; nothing is happening beyond more sheep and more cattle, and time is slipping by. Sarah is angry with God that she has no child. She takes things into her own hands, confronts Abraham, and says “Go, lie with my Egyptian maidservant Hagar, and see if you can raise me a family through her” (16:1-2). Now this kind of “surrogate motherhood” was apparently widespread for two millennia in the ancient Middle East, and Abraham apparently never gave it a thought. He gave in quickly to his wife's scolding and scheming, did what she told him, and soon got Hagar pregnant.

That this was a colossal mistake; that it would start more trouble and strife for Abraham and Sarah and their descendants than they could possibly imagine; is, of course, what the Biblical writer and we know! Never let anyone tell you the Bible *celebrates* patriarchy – on the contrary, it shows you just how *badly* it worked out, generation after generation!

So you know the story: Hagar bears a son named Ishmael; she despises barren Sarah, and seems to displace her in Abraham's affections. Sarah is jealous, and conflict between the two women is inevitable. Abraham shows no more wisdom in the conflict than to tell them “sort it out for yourselves!” Sarah is so incensed with him that she effectively calls down a curse on her husband: “may the LORD judge between you and me,” she screams. Hagar and her son flee Sarah's wrath and mistreatment, only to be rescued by an angel and sent back. God is not finished with young Ishmael yet! He too will inherit a promise, to “become a great nation,” but the LORD also says “he will be a wild donkey of a man... who will live in hostility toward all his brothers.”

(So, parenthetically, if you want to understand the history of troubles in the Middle East, you have to go back at least this far – to the enmity between Sarah and Hagar, and what would come between their offspring: Ishmael, considered by Muslims to be their link to Abraham; and Isaac, seen by Jews and Christians as the heir to “the line of promise.”)

And God *will* make his promise come true. Abraham and Sarah will have a son, to be named Isaac – meaning “*he laughs*” – in honor of the laughter that erupts from both of them at the LORD's promise. Oddly, Abraham's laugh goes unnoticed, whereas Sarah's “laughter to herself” meets the

LORD's reprimand. Was Sarah perhaps hearing the promise for the first time? Had Abraham not told her what God had promised him earlier? Or was Sarah deep in disbelief? Her response is to laugh and say "shall I have that pleasure at my age?" - more a sensual or even a sexual reference than a faithful acceptance of God's promised child. "Why did you laugh?" says the LORD. Sarah is afraid: "I didn't laugh." "Oh, but you did," says the LORD. Sarah's faith is being tested. Does she believe God? Abraham is credited with "righteousness" for believing God's promise of a son. Can Sarah have faith in God too?

3) *Chaos*

You would hope that this is only the prelude to a cheerful ending; Sarah believes, they get pregnant late in life, and they all live happily ever after with their new son, his surrogate older brother, and his mother the maid-servant. But instead there is chaos to live through.

Almost unbelievably, Abraham again becomes fearful instead of trusting God, and having wandered south and then west from their base in Hebron in search of pasture, they arrive in Philistine territory. When Abimelech the king of Gerar gets a look at Sarah, once again Abraham decides to pass her off as his sister, and hands her over to the king! Now remember, this is the stage when Isaac has been promised but is not yet born! God intervenes to warn Abimelech in a dream not to even touch Sarah, and she is reunited with Abraham. They are ejected from Philistia as they were 30 years earlier from Egypt, sent back to Canaan with extra sheep and goats. Early Jewish rabbinic writers were so horrified by this incident that they invented the story that God would make Isaac's features the exact replica of Abraham's, to prove Isaac was not the son of Abimelech!

At last Isaac - "he laughs" - is born, and for a moment there is joy all around. But soon, conflict between the early teenage Ishmael and his little half-brother Isaac emerges, and once again Sarah takes control. "Send the slave-girl and her son away," she tells Abraham; "that boy will never share the inheritance with my son." Abraham has had a decade to become fond of Ishmael, has prayed that God will bless him, and fears what will happen if Ishmael is sent away. Interestingly, God's answer to Abraham is "Listen to your wife." "Let them go," says the LORD, "Isaac is the one - remember? He is the son of promise, the one I will extend my covenant to."

So Hagar and Ishmael are banished, and go to live on the borders of Egypt. God promises Hagar that Ishmael will be blessed, and become a great nation. Twelve sons will be born to him. The rest is history. Some Jewish commentators, even today, argue that "our mother Sarah" sinned in her harshness to Hagar, and that ever since, Jews have paid the price for that at the hands of the descendants of Ishmael.

Where does all this lead? Strangely, in the mysterious grace of God, to an emphasis on *laughter*. Sarah laughed when God said she would become pregnant at her age. She probably did anything but laugh when her fearful and insecure husband passed her off for a second time as his sister, and nearly landed her in Abimelech's bed! But at last, despite all, when her son Isaac - "he laughs" - is born, Sarah proclaims "*God has brought me laughter*; and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me... who would have thought it..?" (21:6).

Sarah died at the grand age of 127, and was buried in the cave Abraham purchased at Hebron. It became known as "The Cave of the Patriarchs" and tradition says Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah

(but not Rachel) were all buried there. To this day it is the second holiest site to Jews after the Temple Mount. Great memorials were built over the cave; the earliest by Herod the Great; and of course in the medieval period a mosque was added – reminding us that Sarah and Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael are all revered ancestors to Muslims, as well as to Jews and Christians.

4) *God's Ways*

What should we make of such tales? Is Sarah a “woman of faith” for us all to emulate? She is revered as a “mother of the nation” – as also is Hagar – but she is clearly an ambiguous figure, just like her husband, Abraham “the man of faith.” Sarah shows how a woman’s faith and intuitions can advance God’s purposes, even in a patriarchal society; that she makes big mistakes when she grabs control; but that she may finish up laughing at God’s goodness.

Both Sarah and Abraham are lauded in Hebrews 11 as examples of Old Testament faith – they *both* believed God, and that is why they were able to conceive in their old age to produce the child of promise. God was gracious to both of them in ways they did not expect or deserve. The LORD protected them even when they made awful decisions that could have led to even greater disasters than they did. God forgave them, he made promises to them, he said they were under his covenant, he said he would use them to advance his purposes in the world.

In other words, like us, Sarah and her husband were ordinary people caught up in extraordinary times in the purposes of God; times when the actions – good and bad – of a handful of people set in motion developments that changed their worlds and changed history. In responding to God, they were not especially faithful people, not

especially heroic; they were subject to fear, confusion, forgetfulness, jealousy, envy, harshness, bad judgment, aging and deteriorating bodies – just like all the rest of us! But by the grace of God they were able to respond in faith to the most important things; and their mistakes and bad judgments and undoubted sins never stopped God’s gracious plans from moving ahead, in their lives and in his world!

We should all learn that whether we live in patriarchy or freedom, with fear or with old age, in jealousy or contentment, faith in God can lead us to become great people for him and to achieve great things as instruments in his hands. You and I cannot even guess at this moment whether someone in this little congregation, or one of the young children whose lives we are helping to shape, will emerge as “God’s man or woman for the 21st C.” and change the world forever. But God is great and very gracious, not least in the way he uses ordinary people – and even “princesses” – to achieve his purposes.

Let us pray...