

The Journey of Faith: Not by Might

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

6 "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

7 The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

9 Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." 10 The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

11 The angel of the LORD also said to her:

"You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. 12 He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

13 She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." 14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. (Genesis 16:1-16)

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

One of my favorite TV commercials was one from Mervyn's. There is a woman, outside the store, early in the morning, talking excitedly about the tremendous sale going on. She can't wait to get into the store to snap up all the bargains. The commercial ends with her trying her magic on the locked doors, telling them to "Open! Open! Open!"

Like many of us, she hated to wait. And we spend an awful lot of time waiting, don't we? We wait in traffic. We wait in doctors' offices. We wait in checkout lines at stores. We wait to hear back test results. We wait for an email or a letter. Much of life seems to be spent waiting.

And our text this morning describes Abram's family, on their spiritual journeys, and they are waiting. Unfortunately, they are shown to be waiting in destructive ways, and not helpful ways. So let's look at what we can learn about waiting.

To set the scene, it is important to note that from Genesis 12 to Genesis 16, some ten years have passed. This is one of the hard facts in Bible reading, that sometimes we turn a page or two, and have no idea how

much time has really passed. But verse 3 indicates that this story happened after Abram and Sarai had been living in the land for ten years.

Ten Years

Ten years is a long time. Think back on what the world was like ten years ago. Ten years ago, George Bush was in his first term as president. A headline from Money magazine heralded that the unemployment rate in the US had skyrocketed to its highest level in four years, all the way to 4.9%! Can you imagine? Gray Davis was still governor of California, and California was struggling with blackouts.

Ten years ago, the World Trade Center Towers still stood in lower Manhattan. Ten years ago, we did not use words like Islamic terrorist. Ten years ago, our country was not involved in wars in Iraq nor Afghanistan. Ten years ago, we were all ten years younger! For me, ten years ago, my kids were still in elementary school, my mom, dad and brother were still alive. Ten years ago, we were renting a house, and our dogs had not yet been born.

Ten years ago, there were no iPads. In fact, ten years ago, there were no iPods, as they would not be marketed until November 2001. Ten years ago, the first Harry Potter movie was released late in the year, and The Fellowship of the Ring was in theaters. The Twilight books had not been released, and there was no such thing as Blu-Ray DVD's.

Ten years is a long time. And Abram and Sarai had been waiting for ten years for the fulfillment of God's promise to them, that they would have a son. Month after month, Abram and Sarai try to get pregnant. And month after month, she remains barren. Month after month, Abram hopes and prays for the promised son, while loving his wife. And month after month, he is disappointed. For a year. For two years. For three years. For four years. For five years. For six years. Surely now, right, Lord? For seven years. For eight years. For nine years. For nine years and a month. For nine years and two months. For nine years and eight months. For ten years. Hoping. Praying. Working. Trusting. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

What do you do when what you were promised, what you had hoped for, is not happening? Do you give up in despair? Or do you keep waiting? Or do you take control of the situation?

Taking Control

Sarai seems to be fed up with waiting, so takes matters into her own hands. When I read this, I can't help but think of a scary movie with the hero walking into a dark room where you, the audience, knows a monster lurks. You want to shout at the screen, "Don't go in there!" And I feel like shouting at Sarai, "Don't do it!"

However, waiting does strange things to people. So Sarai tells Abram to go sleep with her maid, and perhaps that would give them the promised son. So Abram does what he is told, and Hagar, indeed becomes pregnant. Then the fireworks begin.

Sarai is mad at Abram for doing such a foolish thing. She is also probably angry at herself, because now she knows that their inability to become pregnant is not Abram's fault, but hers, as Abram was able to get Hagar pregnant.

Hagar begins to act proudly towards her mistress, Sarai, and taunts her. Since Hagar is now pregnant with Abram's child, and Sarai is still barren, the balance of power seems to have shifted in the household. And in response to this, Sarai decides that enough is enough, and tells Abram to "Get that woman out of here!"

And poor Abram just sits in the midst of this whole mess, seemingly puzzled and confused. Torn by the promises of God, the demands of his wife, the disharmony of his household. This whole scene is like an episode of the Jerry Springer Show. Who says the Bible is boring?

It appears that one point of this story is simply to show the disaster of taking matters into our own hands. Instead of waiting on God's promise, Abram and Sarai thought they could jump start the fulfillment of God's promise. And this little family disaster is what they wound up with.

Three Kinds of Waiting

But, you may well ask, what were they supposed to do? How does one wait for so long? There are two kinds of waiting. There is what we call "passive waiting", which is simply doing nothing. Just sit around and wait, and hope that something happens. However, you will not find a job without sending out resumes. You will not find a mate without dating people. Just sitting and praying will not get the house painted.

"Passive waiting" leads to inaction, inertia, and winds up making the one who waits feel like a victim. "Passive waiting" never pushes ahead, never challenges the status quo, never accepts nor embraces change.

“Passive waiting” can appear very spiritual, taking the attitude that, “God is in charge, I am just waiting for Him to do something.”

Another major hazard of “passive waiting” is that it can lead to the dreaded and immobilizing victim mentality. This is where one always plays the victim and randomly blames others for all their mistakes. Such an act can be very hazardous for the growth and development of one's mentality. It also has a very negative impact on one's self esteem. Expectations can play a huge role in this type of victim thinking. If one thinks that he or she deserves something, and somehow they are unable to obtain it, then it can lead to blaming others and pointing fingers (while not doing anything about it themselves).

Notice Sarai's reaction to the news that Hagar is pregnant: *Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me.*

Let me just ask you this morning, when things go wrong, do you accept responsibility for them, or is your first impulse to blame someone else and point fingers? This behavior of blaming others is a sure sign of “passive waiting”.

The opposite of this is “active waiting”, where we continue to work and hope and pray. In “active waiting”, we know that the ultimate outcome of our situation is not in our hands, but we will continue to be faithful in pursuing the outcome anyway. So we mail out resumes. We ask people on dates. We get a paint bucket and paint the house.

Think of steering a ship. “Passive waiting” tries to steer the ship while it is not moving, and fails. “Active waiting” tries to steer the ship while it is moving, and has a much greater chance of success.

So in our story this morning, it seems as though there is this odd combination of both passive and active waiting. Abram and Sarai and Hagar are all active in this story. And yet, when things go wrong, or not as planned, the blamestorm begins. Sarai is angry at Abram and Hagar. Hagar becomes arrogant towards Sarai. And Abram just wants peace in the household.

Perhaps we ought to add another kind of waiting here. Perhaps we should have something like “faithful waiting”. “Faithful waiting” is much like active waiting in the working and hoping and praying, but with this difference: “faithful waiting” relies ultimately on God.

It is very easy to actively wait, and after failure or unresponsiveness, to believe that it is all up to me. And only me. Instead of moving things along and trusting God, the disappointments of life lead us to conclude that God has abandoned us, or that God is no longer interested in us, or that God is just being way too slow for my comfort. So active waiting can sometimes force God's hand, where we are taking charge. But in "faithful waiting", we work hard knowing that the ultimate outcome, whatever it is, is from God.

"Passive waiting" can lead to inertia and depression. "Active waiting" can lead one to become self-centered and controlling. "Faithful waiting" can lead to fruitful labor, and peace with God, because at the heart of "faithful waiting" is trust. "Passive waiting" depends on everyone else. "Active waiting" depends only on me. "Faithful waiting" depends on God working in and through me.

So, how can we tell what kind of waiting we are doing? As I think of my own life, I think that when I am in the "passive waiting" mode, I pray less. Because to pray about situations would make me engaged in them.

When I am in the "active waiting" mode, I pray more, but I usually pray after I have decided what God should do. In the words from the movie, "Iron Man", it is a read, fire, aim approach. It is an approach in which I ask God to bless what I have already planned!

When I am in the "faithful waiting" mode, I pray more, but I pray before making decisions. I ask God, and I ask wise counsel, on what to do, and I pray that God would help me to do it.

So in our story this morning, Abram and Sarai seem to be actively waiting, since they are in charge of the situation. Hagar seems to be passively waiting, as she has no power in this situation, until she becomes pregnant, of course. However, none of the characters are waiting faithfully. That is, none of them in this story trust in God. They are either depending on others, or themselves. And we see the results.

God Sees

You would think that this is a hopeless mess. However, God shows up to redeem the mess, without making the mess go away.

Sarai mistreats Hagar, and Hagar runs away. She heads towards her homeland in Egypt. On the way, her journey is interrupted by an angel of the Lord, who convinces her to go back to submit to Sarai. Then the angel makes some promises to Hagar, including that she would have many descendants. Imagine the comfort she would have received. Alone,

pregnant, rejected, abused, running away. It says something about Hagar's character that she does go back. And by the end of the story, she bears a son.

At the end of her exchange with this angel, she gives him a name, just as the angel has given her son a name. The name is "God sees". Earlier in the exchange, the angel had said, "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery." Do you recall anywhere else in the Bible where the LORD had heard the misery of His people? Of course, in Egypt. God sent Moses, because he had seen the suffering of His people, who were being mistreated.

This is amazing to me, really. With all the pain and heartache in this story, with selfishness on display at every turn, God still pays attention to the underdog. God still pays attention to the one who is suffering, Hagar.

Perhaps some of you are in the midst of a situation where you are being mistreated. And you wonder whether God has abandoned you.

- A boss is incredibly harsh with you, and does not understand. God sees.
- A trusted colleague or family member has been gossiping about you, spreading bad reports about you to all who would hear. God sees.
- Things are happening at work or school which are out of your control, and you feel like running. God sees.
- You are experiencing some loss, from a death, or a friend moving away. God sees.
- You are experiencing some health crisis, and wondering how or if you are going to make it through. God sees.

It is a beautiful, and powerful word, that God sees. God is paying attention to you, and your situation. Take this to heart, my friends, that God sees. He is not blind. He is not disinterested. God sees.

Children of God

Finally, let me point out a New Testament connection, from the passage we read in John's gospel.

9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

How do we become God's children? In a sense, we are all generically God's children, as God created each one of us.

But there is deeper relationship that God wants with people. God sent His Son, Jesus, as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. By believing in Jesus, our sins are washed away, and we are reconciled to God, becoming God's children. Ishmael may be a child of Abram, but he was not the child of promise, he was a child born, as John says, "of a husband's will." Isaac, who would not be born for another 15 years, would be the child of promise. And our being children of God is to be more like Isaac than Ishmael.

That is, we are not God's children because we go to church, or because we were born into a church going family, as good as those conditions are. We are God's children not based on what we do, but based on what God has already done for us in Christ. All we need to do is receive the gift God offers to us in Jesus, and go on from there as a reconciled, redeemed, reborn child of God.

When I was a college student, I was far from God. I was not raised in the church. And yet, as my Christian friends would tell me about God and His love for me, I would respond that I already had a relationship with God. But that relationship was on my terms, and under my control. And essentially, was no relationship at all! That all changed when I gave my life to Christ some 35 years ago. I believed in Jesus, and welcomed Him into my life. And the adventure has not stopped.

Conclusion

So, my friends, as we as a church look to the future, how will we wait? Will we passively wait, not engaged in the process? Will we actively wait, making our own plans and asking God to bless them? Or will we wait in faith, praying and trusting in God, and believing in His promises for us? My hope is that we will wait faithfully, and like children, we will trust our Heavenly Father to bring renewal and revival. For He is the God that sees.