

“Trust Anyway” Genesis 16:15-16 (1-16)

Today’s story of Abraham comes from the 16th chapter of Genesis, the first book in the Bible. The book of Genesis contains many firsts: the first animals, the first humans, the first sin, the first murder, the first family, the first sacrifice, the first Patriarch, the first promises of God. So many firsts can be found in this book called Genesis, which literally means, “Beginnings”.

We have discovered that Abram was given a promise from God, that he would be great and would become the father of a great nation. The only problem was, Abram did not have any children. How can you be the father of a great nation without any children? God does not immediately give Abram children, and so as Abram waits his faith is tested.

In this chapter, it appears that Abram’s wife, Sarai, is the one losing patience and her faith wavers. She decides she will take matters into her own hands and find her own solution to the problem. If she cannot have children, she will recruit someone else who can to have a baby for her. It is always a dangerous thing to try and get ahead of God, and take matters into our own hands.

I remember a well-known Pastor with a major TV ministry one day declaring that he had a great vision from God of building a ministry center complete with a great prayer tower. It sounded amazing. This pastor was known for his messages on faith, and so I was very surprised, not to mention quite disappointed, when I heard him say he was planning on winning the lottery to build this ministry center! He had faith that God would let him win. I couldn’t believe my ears. Christians do not rely on the lottery to finance the dreams God has given them. The lottery is about chance and trusting in something other than God. Christians do not gamble – they trust in God.

Sarai did something even worse, for she did something that violated the very plans God had for family. Right from the dawn of creation God had a plan for family, bringing one man and one woman together to form a family. They would have children and this family unit would be the basic building block of all societies. Sarai would do something that would start a trend among even God’s people, a trend that would alter God’s plan for family – and it had devastating consequences.

The children were going to read the chapter for me today, but it became apparent that this was not the kind of chapter for our children to dwell on. Sarai and Abram do a bad thing because they stopped trusting the promise of God. God said, “I will...” but Sarai and Abram seem to doubt that God will do anything, so they take matters into their own hands.

As you read through this chapter you can almost hear Sarai getting impatient with God and doubting that he will come through on his promise. In verse 2 she says, “The Lord has kept me from having children...” It is God’s fault, so we will have to take matters into our own hands.

What do they do? Sarai has a servant girl named Hagar who she brought with her from Egypt. Sarai suggests her husband Abram make her a second wife, though a lesser wife, and have a baby with her. That baby can be the child of promise God has failed to give Sarai.

Can you hear what Sarai and Abram's plan proposes? They want to rewrite the plan for family. Instead of one man and one woman, they propose two women and one man be a family. The people around them who do not know God have multiple wives, so why couldn't Abram? Why not? The answer is simple: this was never God's plan.

Until this time, those introduced to us through the scriptures have all been in family as designed by God – one man and one woman. This was the plan revealed at Creation when God created the man, then the woman and brought them together as family in the Garden of Eden. Scriptures tell about the family lines from Adam to Noah with no mention of the mothers, but we do read about Noah and his sons, and they each have one wife, as God designed it in the Garden. Even as we start Abram's story we are told he has one wife, as did his father, and his uncle and his nephew, Lot. This was God's design.

But Sarai now comes up with a new plan: Abram should take on a second wife. To introduce this new plan for family is to say they know better than God. And it says they are not willing to wait on God's timing... And sadly, we will trace family after family in the Old Testament scriptures where they have chosen to have more than one wife – to redefine family – and always it does not go well. By the time the Israelites return from the Exile to Babylon they have caught on – God's ways are always best. After the Exile families will once again be composed of one man and one woman and the children they bear together.

Now wait a minute pastor, you might be thinking. Are you saying that there was something wrong with my family because I grew up with only one parent? Does God reject me because I did not have two parents growing up?

Not at all. What I am saying is that a family can be stronger and fulfill God's plan better if it has both the mother and the father to nurture the children. It is very hard to be a single parent, even in today's society that increasingly adjusts to help the ever-growing number of single parents survive. Children are best nurtured by a dad and a mother who faithfully follow God. The researchers show that children need the nurture and love and guidance of a dad and a mom. Any other model of family may be accepted by society but it will be harder for the parent because it does not follow God's plan. Two moms and two dads are also not a part of God's plan.

Abram gives in to his wife's plan and takes Hagar as a wife. Sarai's plan works, because Hagar is soon pregnant – there is going to be a baby in the family after all. But here is where things start to fall apart.

In verse 4 we read that when Hagar realized she was pregnant, she despised Sarai. She was the blessed one now, and no doubt she would become the favourite wife because she was carrying

the child of Abram. She was no longer respectful of Sarai. She no longer helped her as she used to. Tensions were high between the two women because things were not handled correctly.

Abram does not seem to want to handle the mess he has made, so basically he tells Sarai to do whatever she wants with Hagar. Sarai becomes so mean that Hagar runs away. So much for Sarai and Abram's perfect plan to start a family through Hagar!

Interestingly, despite Hagar being a part of a plan that was not sanctioned by God, indeed it was contrary to God's plan for family, God does not abandon Hagar. As she is fleeing back towards Egypt where she came from, the angel of the Lord meets her and basically tells her to go back to Sarai and Abram. And then God also leaves her with a promise: she would have a son, and though he will be unruly and hard to live with ("a wild donkey of a man" says v. 12) he too will be the start of a great nation. The son is to be called "Ishmael" which means, "The Lord hears."

What a gracious God. He knows Hagar likely would not survive the trip through the wilderness to Egypt alone, and certainly it would be harder as a pregnant woman, so God sends her back to Abram and Sarai. Though things may be tense, if she has a better attitude things would go better. And Abram would be sure to look after her. But even as God is protecting her, note he does not call her Abram's wife – not even his concubine (like a lesser wife). She is simply called "the maiden of Sarai," or "slave of Sarai" (v. 8).

So our text ends by telling us that at 86 years of age Abram has a son through Hagar. This, however, is not the son of promise. This is not the start of the great nation that would trace its ancestry back to Abram. This is not the son that the Saviour, Jesus Christ, would trace his human ancestry back to. No, the promise God made to make Abram a mighty nation embraced Sarai as well. The child of promise must come through her, Abram's one true wife.

Abram and Sarai got impatient and tried to hurry up God's plan. They tried to form a family their own way, not God's way. They seem to doubt God that he will come through on his promise to give them a family. And by taking matters into their own hands they made a mess of things. This son, Ishmael, would become the focus of the Islamic faith. He would be the central figure in Mohamed's teachings, a rewriting of this story to make Ishmael the child of promise. But Ishmael only brought conflict to his family, and still does to this day.

This chapter once again points to the lessons of faith. If God makes a promise, if God says, "I will" then we must wait patiently for him to fulfill that promise. Any attempts we make to change the plan, to hasten the agenda, or to rewrite God's priorities is doomed to failure. Abram learns that lesson in this chapter.

What promises are you waiting for God to fulfill in your life? Finding a new job? Gaining good health? Finding peace? Defining your purpose?

Here is a promise from Jesus all Christians should be waiting for him to fulfill.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God¹; believe also in me. ² My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, **I will** come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Jesus said he will come back again, and if he said he will, we know it is true. Faith says that we know what he said is true. Though God’s people may have waited 2000 years already for the fulfilment of that promise, we do not give up hope, nor do we stop looking with anticipation for his return. He said “I will come back” and we know it is true.

Today we are reminded that God’s word can be trusted. If God says he will do something, he will do it. We must have faith in what he says. As the writer to the Hebrews says,

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

Do you trust God when he says something to you? Will you wait for his purposes to unfold or will you devise your own plans? I want to trust God, and take him at his word. I want to live by faith. How about you?