



feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading. (Isaiah 40:11)

July 07, 2013

Dear Church Family,

Our Summer Series is a continuation of last year's theme. Last year we had people focus on Christian biographies and we learned from the stories of those saints. This year we have asked people to study a biblical character, gleaning how those stories speak into their own lives. Not all of these characters will be positive examples. We will hear about Nebuchadnezzar next time. But even when they are considered biblical heroes, as we see so many heroes of the faith presented in Hebrews 11, a close look at their stories reveals elements that are not heroic at all. That was highlighted as we focused on the character of Sarah. In the Genesis account, Sarah does not conduct herself as a model of faithful and ethical behavior, particularly with regard to her treatment of her maidservant Hagar. And Abraham's conduct toward Sarah is even worse. We need to remember that these people are not commended in Hebrews 11 for their righteousness or their virtue; they are commended for their faith. While we long for heroes who will always reflect Godly character, we are not going to find that in a person. As Jesus said, "No one is good except God alone." Flawed heroes better communicate the gospel, which is the good news that we are justified by faith in Christ, not our own righteousness or virtue.

Hebrews 11:11 *"By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised."* This is interesting because in the Genesis account, Sarah is presented as responding to God's promise of a child with incredulous laughter, hardly a response of faith. This should be encouraging to us. Our confidence is in God, not that we will have enough faith to access His power. In the Genesis story, what we see from Sarah is a lack of faith, but that does not disqualify her from receiving the power to conceive.

Sarai (her original name) is a tragic figure, a woman who is suffering from a lack of status and honor. She is introduced in Genesis 11 without any kinship ties (important indicators of status in the ancient world). We then learn that she is barren, unable to conceive a child. This is a difficult trial for any woman. Not only is there the longing for a child that remains agonizingly unfulfilled month after month, there is also a feeling of being incomplete as a woman. In the ancient world there was the added stigma of a woman's worth being measured almost entirely in terms of child bearing. We learn about God's promise to make Abram a great nation and the promise of a land for his offspring, but there is no mention yet of that happening with Sarai. There could be another wife.

Abram's treatment of Sarai when they go into Egypt (and later in the Negeb) can only make her feel worse about herself. He fears that her great beauty will cause others to covet her for themselves and they will kill him in order to have her. So he tells her to say that she is his sister. Sadly, Sarai cannot take comfort that her beauty is a source of delight to her husband, and therefore gain status in his eyes. He perceives her beauty as a threat and what could be an asset becomes a liability in her life. We can see that Abram is a very poor husband in this instance. Particularly when we consider Paul's teaching to husbands in Ephesians 5, where they are to give up their lives for their wives and nourish and cherish them as their own bodies. Rather than feeling cherished, Sarai likely feels expendable. Perhaps Abram is looking for a way to be rid of her so that he can have a wife who can give him a child.

In Genesis 16, Sarai comes up with a plan to give her maidservant Hagar to Abram so that a child will be produced. This seems an unusual plan to us but was not unheard of in that time and the child would be seen as belonging to Sarai. *"Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her."* The word translated *"obtain children"* means to be built up. This is Sarai's desperate attempt to gain status for herself. But the plan backfires because when Hagar conceives, *"she looked with contempt on her mistress."* This word for contempt means to be diminished. Sarai's plan to build herself up results in her being diminished in the eyes of the person closest to her. Her anger at Abram appears misplaced, after all it was her idea, not his, and we might point out that her actions with regard to Hagar are wrong and she is getting what she deserves. But if Sarai acts wrongly to try and help herself, Abram acts wrongly in Egypt, yet he ends up better off as a result.

Sarai is lashing out at the injustice of her life.

God speaks to Abram a third time in Genesis 17, changing his name to Abraham and revealing that Sarai will bear him a son and that God will establish His covenant with Isaac. God will deliver Sarai from dishonor and bestow upon her great honor, changing her name to Sarah and declaring that kings of people will come from her. Abraham responds to this gracious news with disbelief and is so incredulous that he falls on his face laughing. He then says to the Lord, *“Oh that Ishmael might live before you.”* This response is revealing. His thoughts are not toward Sarah, but rather toward his heritage. He is essentially saying, forget Sarah Lord and bless me through Ishmael. This response speaks loudly of Sarah as a neglected wife.

The Lord appears again in Genesis 18 and this time Sarah overhears Him telling Abraham that she will give birth to a son in a year’s time. She also responds with incredulous laughter, only she laughs to herself. The Lord knows that she has laughed and asks, *“Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too hard for the Lord?”* Some people see this as the Lord rebuking Sarah for her unbelief. But notice that the Lord is addressing Abraham not Sarah. Abraham has not heard Sarah laugh, but he knows that he laughed when he heard the news before. And what the Lord repeats is much closer to what Abraham said than what Sarah said. This rebuke is aimed at Abraham. Further, another reason why Sarah laughs is that she is hearing this for the first time. Abraham has not shared the news with her and I believe the Lord is rebuking Abraham for that.

Sarah tries to deny her laughter and the Lord responds, *“No but you did laugh.”* Rather than some sort of rebuke, this can be perceived as the Lord telling her that He knows her. She is not forgotten or neglected by Him. He knows that she laughed and He knows all the tears and frustration she has suffered.

Incredibly, Abraham does the same thing with Sarah when they travel to the Negeb as he did in Egypt. This is after the Lord has promised that she will bear the son of the covenant. It is remarkable that the Lord does not give up on Abraham at this point. Instead, the Lord protects Sarah from King Abimilech, and it is Abimilech who shows concern for Sarah’s honor, recognizing that she is held in high esteem by the Lord.

In Genesis 21 Sarah gives birth to Isaac with laughter of joy and delight. The source of her shame and disgrace is now reversed by what the Lord has done for her after all the years. Sarah’s story speaks to us when we are facing an area of life where we want to be fruitful for the Lord, but we have proven ourselves inadequate. We struggle with feelings of failure, shame and frustration, in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. We may have tried things in our own strength that have backfired. We may be aware that others have let us down when we looked to them for support. We may have hurt others in our efforts to build ourselves up. The story of Sarah speaks of God’s faithfulness. He is not disappointed in us, holding our failures against us. He is for us and wants to build us up. In fact we are already built up in His eyes. That is the source of our confidence and the foundation that we need. And we need to know this by faith in order to endure the situation that we find ourselves in. We need to be able to draw upon this truth while enduring the circumstances that are weighing us down; *“for faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* May the Lord Himself minister that assurance and conviction to your heart.

In Him,

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