

“Women of the Bible: Sarah”

“Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see”
(Hebrews 11:1).

Genesis 11:27-31; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Romans 8:22-25 ¹

Pastors spend a good bit of time in waiting rooms. Sometimes the waiting is for surgery. Sometimes the waiting is in intensive care. Sometimes the waiting is for a new baby to be born. Sometimes the waiting is for “heaven’s chariot” as resurrection nears.

When I was a chaplain resident at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas in 1980, I was simultaneously assigned to the maternity unit and to that intensive care unit which was known among families as the place one went to die. The combination gave a healthy perspective.

Whether the waiting is for birth or for death, waiting rooms in hospitals are unlike most other places in our lives. Families in waiting rooms can’t do enough for each other. No one is rude. Distinctions of race and class melt away. Vanity and pretense vanish. Everyone pulls for everyone else. The whole universe is focused on the clock and on the physician’s next report. Everyone knows beyond any doubt whatsoever that loving relationships are at the core of what life is really all about.² I want to talk with you this morning about *love* and about *waiting*.

Waiting has never been popular, but waiting has seldom had such bad press as it has today. We seem to have lost most of our ability to wait for anything. *Google* reports after a search that they’ve returned 470 million hits . . . in 43/100ths of a second. I once ordered a computer part at 10 p.m. and received it the next morning while I was eating breakfast. And *Amazon* now delivers some things to our doors in an hour or less. Here’s the result of one survey about how long we’re willing to wait for something:

- A car in front of you at a green light: 5 seconds
- People talking in a movie: 26 seconds
- Waiting for someone late to an interview: 2 minutes
- Waiting in line at *Starbucks*: 7 minutes
- Someone talking too loudly on a cell phone: 2 ½ minutes
- Airport security: 28 minutes
- Doctor’s waiting room: 32 minutes³

Unpopular though it is, waiting is not only an inevitable part of our lives—waiting is also a very important part of our lives. Richard Hendrix observed that “**Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter.**”⁴ Let me tell you about someone who knew something about waiting.

There is much about the story we don’t know, but we do know that nearly 4,000 years ago, a young man named Abram married his half-sister, Sarai, in the ancient city of Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was a major port on the Euphrates River, and the remains of the city are located about 220 miles southeast of Baghdad.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 26, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² Hugh Duncan, *Leadership*, vol. 16.

³[www.11points.com/Personal/11_Things_We_Hate_Waiting_For_\(and_How_Long_We'll_Wait_Before_Freaking_Out\)](http://www.11points.com/Personal/11_Things_We_Hate_Waiting_For_(and_How_Long_We'll_Wait_Before_Freaking_Out))

⁴ Richard Hendrix, *Leadership*, vol. 7, no.3.

If you have your Bible, you may want to follow along with the journey we're about to take. Let's begin with Genesis 11:30: "*But Sarai was unable to become pregnant and had no children.*" I doubt that we men can really understand the yearning and the sadness that underlie this statement.

Far more than seems to be the case with men, a woman's whole being often seems to cry out for children; and in ancient times the social stigma of having no children was far greater than is the case today. These days, the choice not to have children is a fairly common decision that couples make . . . but that was not the case back then.

And so, on one long-ago morning, while Sarai was yearning and waiting for a baby, Abram told her, "Sweetheart, we're going to move. Daddy (Terah was father to both of them, but they had different mothers) wants to move the clan to the land of Canaan. I'm not sure where that is, but it's a long way from here." The journey was actually almost 1,000 miles, spanning the entire scope of what we know as the "Fertile Crescent."

If you can imagine that Crescent, running from the Persian Gulf up to modern Turkey and then down to Israel and to Egypt beyond, Terah decided that they'd gone far enough when they reached Haran, another river city at the top of the Crescent. Abram and Sarai lived in Haran for many years, and eventually their father died. Sarai was still waiting for a baby.

The Bible tells us that after Terah died, God told Abram: "*Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. I will cause you to become the father of a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and I will make you a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you*" (Genesis 12:1-3).

Now because we live on this side of the Resurrection, you and I know that God was speaking of Jesus, the Messiah, for whom Abram and Sarai would be ancestors. But Abram didn't know that. So Abram told Sarai once more, "Sweetheart, we're moving again." (Just in case you think you're too old for adventures with God, Abram was 75 years old at this point, and Sarai was 65!)

We tend to think of Abram as courageous, and for good reason, since he was willing to obey God not only in moving to Canaan but in the terrible test that came later with Isaac. But Abram was far from perfect. In fact, on at least two occasions, he was a dreadful coward and a complete jerk. Here's what happened . . .

The move from Haran became a move to the land of Canaan, which would eventually become "the Promised Land." But after they'd been in Canaan a while, a terrible famine came in the land, and Abram moved his family to Egypt until the famine ended.

Even though Sarai was well over 65 years old at this point—and still waiting for a baby—the Bible tells us that she was very beautiful—so beautiful, in fact, that Abram was afraid that the Egyptians would kill him to get her. So . . . he told Sarai that they were going to tell folks that she was his sister instead of his wife. That was partly true, of course, but it also meant that Abram intended to risk Sarai's life and virtue instead of his own. Some hero! That shenanigan got Abram and his family kicked out of Egypt under armed escort!

Even after such behavior as this, and even though Abram and Sarai were probably 85 and 75 by this point, God spoke once more to Abram after they returned to Canaan and renewed the promise that they would have so many descendants that they would outnumber the stars of heaven (Genesis 15:5). The problem was that the years continued to go by . . . with no baby!

Then Sarai had an idea. Maybe God needed some help with this baby thing. Sarai suggested that Abram try to have a child with her servant Hagar. That sounds pretty weird to us, but it wasn't unusual at all in those days. Further, their customs were such that Hagar's child would be counted as belonging to her mistress.

The plan seemed to work, and little Ishmael soon joined the family . . . but whereas Sarai and Hagar had previously been the best of friends, Hagar didn't take Sarai's efforts to claim to Ishmael very kindly. The plan to help God get His act together didn't work out very well at all!

More than a dozen more years went by. Abram was now 99; Sarai was 89. God renewed the promise a third time, this time changing Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah as a symbol of this covenant. *But there was still no baby.*

As years passed, Abraham became wealthy, with many flocks and herds, and he had to move fairly often in order to find grazing land for all his animals. It was during Sarah's 89th year that one such move took them into territory where Abraham became concerned once more about Sarah's beauty (at 89!) as it related to his own health and well-being. Abraham tried the shameful "sister act" trick again, with the same disastrous result.

I really doubt that Abraham and Sarah's relationship was all that great after this—I mean, how could it have been?—but God still kept His promise. When Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100, the years—indeed, the *decades*—of waiting finally ended, and Isaac was born—the Son of Promise, through whom the Messiah would eventually come.

There's a lot more to this story, and I hope you'll go back this afternoon and reread Genesis 12-23 to learn the rest of it. For the next few minutes, though, I invite you to think about your life in the light of some key themes in Sarah's life.

While you may not have waited for something for 90 years, as Sarah waited for Isaac, I'll bet you've had some experience with waiting. It may even be that some of us here this morning feel as though our lives have been put on hold. Like a blinking light on a telephone keypad, it may seem to you that your calls to God have been put on hold with no background music. And worse than no music, the message-on-hold that you're hearing sounds a lot like "So there! God doesn't care about your problems. God's not going to help you. You're going to have to get out of this yourself. Good luck."

Although Sarah had never imagined anything like a telephone, I suspect that her inner conversation with the Tempter sounded a lot like that. Sarah found herself believing the Tempter rather than God's promise, and she and Abraham ended up creating a lot more heartache for themselves than would have been involved in waiting for God's timing.

Henri Nouwen was a well-known Catholic priest and author who spent the last years of his life as chaplain to severely handicapped folk in Canada. He kept a journal during the last year of his life in which he told about some friends who were aerialists, or trapeze artists. Nouwen's friends told him that there is a unique relationship between the "flyer" and the "catcher" on the trapeze. As you might expect, the "flyer" is the person who lets go, and the "catcher" is the person who catches. As the flyer swings high above the crowd, there comes a moment in which he or she must let go, arcing out into empty space.

Because any movement after the release changes the critical trajectory, the flyer has to remain as motionless as possible, waiting for that moment when the strong arms of the catcher pluck him or her out of the air. "The flyer must never try to catch the catcher," Nouwen's friends

told him. “The flyer must catapult motionless through the air in absolute trust. The catcher will come, but the flyer must wait.”⁵

Compared to that, the waiting you and I experience isn’t too bad, I guess, but it’s still not a lot of fun, is it? Eugene Peterson, who paraphrased that version of the Bible known as *The Message*, wrote that “In prayer, we [become] aware that God is in action and that when the circumstances are ready, when others are in the right place, and when our hearts are prepared, [God] will call us into the action. **Waiting in prayer is a disciplined refusal to act before God acts.**”⁶ We let go, and then we don’t change anything.

I played in a jazz band when I was in Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island in 1972. I enjoyed the band, even though it practiced early in the morning, and this enjoyment was considerably enhanced by the fact that it got me out of cleaning the bathrooms (the Navy has another term for this).

One of the songs we played in that band was a number by the group *Chicago* entitled “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?” I like that title, because no matter where we find ourselves on life’s journey, a question that fits every situation we encounter is “**Lord, what time is it? What do you want me/us to learn from this situation? What do faith and obedience require here?**”⁷

As we’ve noted again and again, God’s twin purposes in the world are to shape our individual character into the likeness of Christ, and to shape our collective relationships into the beginnings of the New Creation. Our speed-of-light world makes us impatient with waiting for God’s shaping; but my teacher Glenn Hinson was fond of saying that “**Spiritual growth is seldom more rapid than physical growth.**”

If you’re a gardener, you know that the stuff that grows quickly in the yard or in the garden is most likely weeds. In stark contrast, the towering trees that lift our thoughts toward heaven grow so slowly as to be almost imperceptible. So perhaps the question is, “Do you want to be a weed or a walnut tree? A dandelion or a dogwood?” **Those who would become beautiful and useful in the realm of the Spirit must learn to wait.**

The Message paraphrases Romans 8:22-25 this way: “*That’s why I don’t think there’s any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead.*”

Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it’s not only around us; it’s within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We’re also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don’t see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.”

My friend, do you find yourself in one of life’s “waiting rooms” this morning? There’s no question that it’s difficult to bear the anxiety of the in-between times of life. Hurtling through

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey* (Crossroads Classic, 1998).

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Leadership*, vol. 8, no. 2.

⁷ Along this line, the author of Ecclesiastes wrote that “*There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven*” (3:1), and the psalmist wrote that “*My times are in your hands*” (31:15).

what seems like thin air without being able to see the “catcher” is hard. Yet the essence of anxiety is our tendency to put God in the past tense rather than the future tense. The essence of faith is trusting ourselves to that loving Power of the Future Whom we are persuaded is trustworthy. The substance of faith is to yearn for—and to wait for—that new place that God has for us, even though we cannot see it now.

Sarah’s story reminds us that **God is not bound by what usually happens**. God can—and often does—cause previously-unheard-of events to take place! God beckons us to live lives that are fully open to God’s power coming toward us out of the promised future of His Kingdom. *The final word of God’s loving faithfulness still remains to be spoken.*

Perhaps this prayer will help us adjust our hurried attitudes:

“God, help me to be silent before you—that I may hear you;
at rest in you—that you may work in me;
open to you—that you may enter my heart;
empty before you—that you may fill me.
Let me be still and know you are my God,
and I can fully trust you.
Amen.”⁸

⁸ Modified from Sir Paul Reaves’s prayer at the WCC 7th Assembly in Canberra, *Christianity Today*, vol. 35, no. 11.