

“Meaning Sought, Meaning Found”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

My name is Abraham. Who were you expecting, Charlton Heston? That is Moses. My life has been very confusing, and often misinterpreted - over the thousands of years that I have lived, and died, and now live on in people's memories. I have been honored and called the Father of Nations, because I am Father Abraham, father of Jews, Muslims and Christians. Yet my life is not one I would encourage you to emulate. I hope you will understand why. By the time this passage was written it said in Scripture that I was 75 years old. Now I need to tell you they didn't have the calendar the same way they do now. I probably wasn't more than 30.

In our generation, for Sarah and me, it was very difficult if you did not start having children when the women were 12, 13, or 14 years old. For the men it wasn't unusual to be a little older, but we had gone a long time. She and I and were probably about the same age, so to have a 30-year-old wife who was still very beautiful, but barren, was about the worst thing that could happen to someone.

You may say, well, why is that so bad?

If you go back to the first five books of the Old Testament - the Pentateuch (“penta” meaning five): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – and look at those first five books there is no description yet of an afterlife; no Heaven. Well, there was a Heaven but it wasn't one where we were invited into it yet. The idea was still emerging, and it wasn't fully understood until you actually get to the prophets, where you have a fully understood idea of an eternal life or a kingdom beyond.

That is why the Pharisees, by the time of Jesus, had a belief in an afterlife but the Sadducees did not. The Sadducees only followed the first five books of the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scripture. So the only way, at this earliest point of Genesis, that you lived on was through your progeny. It was through the children that you had, and to be barren - without children - was to die without moving on, without continuing. So the bitterness of being without children in that day and age was the most horrifying thing that could happen.

It would make people bitter and Sarah, in the Hebrew Scriptures, often in Genesis looks like a bitter, horrible person - laughing at God, making fun, not believing enough. You have to understand that she suffered the pointing, the laughter, the whispers: “Why did God not bless her or us?” And they were cruel. So when you read about biblical characters like me and like Sarah, and others, try to soak in what was really going on in our lives that hurt us so deeply. Don't create super heroes of us - but also don't make fun. Our lives are every bit as complex, hurtful and hopeful as yours.

So I want to go through, for a few minutes, and tell you my story so you have a better idea and understanding of who we are and what we went through - good and bad - so you can learn from both the faith that Sarah and I have, and from our very real mistakes.

For the first 75 years we had a wonderful, easy life, we lived in the city in southern Babylon. We had wealth, opportunity, and we had fun, except we could not have a child. As I said, the bitterness and the whispers and the laughter just never let us truly enjoy all of the blessings we had.

Then, all of a sudden, we moved to Haran and from there started a new life again. Maybe it would be better, maybe just a change of pace would help our lives - our marriage - maybe people would be more gentle and loving there.

It was there in Haran where God called down and told me to leave the land that I was in and that God would show me a different place, a more unique place. And I think one of the reasons why I am so celebrated in the book of Genesis is because everybody thinks, "How wonderful. I didn't know God, but I followed. I trusted God." Do you want to know the truth? Sarah and I were open to anything because our lives felt empty. So if God wanted to do something with us [I said], "Fine. Let's give it a shot." And we followed.

Now, when God calls you, you had better be prepared, because when God calls you it is often to the most difficult things. When someone says, "I have a call from God," I go, "Oh," because God is now saying to you, "I have trust that you have the skill, the ability and the faith to take on this call where most people cannot."

It is hard work fulfilling a call and it is going to hurt. It is going to be hard, and you had better to be ready. If you don't feel your call right now (like I was talking to the children and they are still learning and growing), you had better be working at preparing yourself. When we care for the children we care for them to prepare them for their call, for the hard work and the pain; the difficulty that only they can provide; and you - if you are not feeling the call right now - use that time to prepare yourself for the hard work and tough challenges that will lie ahead.

Here are some of ours:

God called us to the land of Canaan and we went to the city of Shechem. God again reminded me of my call, and he said it very clearly, "I promise you that your descendants, my descendants will fill this land."

Now I'm starting to get up there in age; Sarah certainly is. She is beautiful, but nothing changed, year after year, and still God is spouting this stuff at me. I must admit I didn't take it well; it wasn't reassuring. It frankly made me angry. [I thought,] "Do something about it then. My time line is gone; her clock is ticking. Come on."

Then it went from bad to worse. All of a sudden there was a famine in the land of Canaan and we had to flee to Egypt, and while we were in Egypt all sorts of struggles happened. There was food there. I actually - as a business person - was wildly successful, but I didn't trust God the way I should have. Here was Sarah, unable to have a child, but she was absolutely beautiful, and that is hard because you walk down the street and everybody looks at her. You feel everybody is looking and wondering, "What is she doing with him?" to the point that Pharaoh - the most powerful figure in Egypt - saw her and so was enamored that he came up to me.

Now Pharaoh was the most powerful figure in the entire world, and all you do is get on your knees and hope to God he doesn't decide to kill you, especially so he can take your wife into his harem. I didn't trust God to protect me in that moment so I said, "This is my sister," and he takes her away to his harem.

I'm embarrassed to say it. It's humiliating that I couldn't even stand up for my wife, let alone trust God. I'm human, but God found a way to work it out to let Pharaoh know that this is not appropriate - that this is idolatry - and as sinful as Father Abraham was, Pharaoh - not me - was more ethical and more appropriate. Pharaoh said, "I know who she is now. Shame on you for putting me in that position. But I will let you go with your wife and I will let you go with all the money that you have gleaned while you have been in my country."

Pharaoh was the ethical one and it humbled me and embarrassed me even more.

So then we go back and I went along with my nephew Lot, and you have heard a lot about Lot, but you hear the story about the wife, but that happens later on. Lot and I go back. We have all of this money and we have all of these animals and things are going well, and we get back to the land of Canaan, and we say we need to separate because we have so much that we need separate grazing places in order to make sure that all of our animals are successful. So he goes to one area and I go to another; shortly after we separate foreign invaders come in to Lot's area, snatch him, murder some of his people, and take all of his money. And I take 318 men, that's how powerful I am at this time. Not only do I have the income and the animals but I have that many people at my disposal, and we take 318 of them and we go and rob those invaders. We take back Lot and we take all of the booty they had gathered and now it is ours. The power and strength. And in your 21st century you may think that is abusive or whatever, but in my mind and the eyes of God in that brutal period of time it was a blessing.

So we move on. We have the blessing now of another divine mission. God speaks to me yet again and says, "All of your children will occupy this land," Ten, fifteen years have passed and still God's spouting promises without one opportunity to prove it.

So we are embarrassed again. Sarah has had enough. She brings Hagar - and you know the story. She brought her. I didn't buy into it, but we were fed up with God's promises and it not working, so I have a son Ishmael. But then, all of a sudden, God kept promising and when she did become pregnant with Isaac, what do we do with Ishmael, the first born? So because I allowed it - and Sarah pushed it - we cast him out to die. Now, in hindsight, I am so embarrassed. I am horrified this Father Abraham was so inhuman. I was so lost in not knowing what to do.

God made the same promise to the family that I could not accept: That you, Ishmael, would have descendants; that you two as well would be blessed and fill the land with people - descendants. God took what I had done so poorly and made it right. I don't deserve any of the accolades. I don't deserve to be called "Father Abraham," except by the grace of God, and not one bit by myself. And yet God - even though over and over again, I fell short - God did not give up on me.

The next thing that happened was that we had the three visitors that come to our tent. These three visitors seem to be like what we would later understand as the "Trinity": God in three

persons coming and speaking to us and saying the very words of God. “That we will have descendants who will fill the land. We will have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.” And, what does Sarah do? She laughs - a hurtful, bitter laugh. I don’t blame her, because I was laughing inside as she was doing it out loud. We had heard this for so long, and nothing ever changed. She was getting older and I was getting older and, yet, God wasn’t laughing. Even though we laughed in God’s face, God did not give up on us. And she gave birth and we had Isaac.

Now after that I’m “Abraham” in this weird bazaar story [that] does not end. Now we are at a point where we are faced with another king. This king was a southern king from Canaan. He comes and sees Sarah, who was considerably older than she was when she was in Egypt, but she was still so amazingly beautiful. He wanted her and I knew just what to do: [I said,] “This is my sister.” I did it again! I didn’t even learn my lesson.

God came to the King and said, “Stop. This is adultery. He is lying. The King did exactly the same thing that Pharaoh did. Take her and get out of my sight. How dare you lie! You almost put me with odds with God.”

I walked away - shoulders slumped. I had done it again, I’m like the Apostle Peter denying Jesus three times, I had denied God even more.

So by the time you get to the strange story of God asking me to sacrifice my son Isaac - my God, I was going to do it! It took the very hand of the angel to stop me. I think God needed me to do it, so I could end the rest of my life knowing that at least once, once I did exactly what God wanted. And, at least once I trusted God even with the most important thing in my life. Thank goodness Sarah never found out!

I think that’s what that story is about: what God did to me. It wasn’t that I was ever going to let Isaac die, but he [God] needed to kill the bitterness and self-loathing in my own heart so that I could die knowing that at least once I had actually followed through and trusted God.

Now, why have I told you my entire life story? Because I’m willing to bet that I’m not the only one who sits in a religious environment and feels that they are not worthy. We have all humiliated ourselves, fallen short of the glory of God, wished we had done it differently knowing that we cannot take certain things back.

But if you live your life that way, like I did, on so many occasions, then you will never live up to the call that God has for your life. You are placed on this earth not to be perfect. You are placed on this earth to fulfill your call; and, if you beat the tar out of yourself, and you belittle yourself, and you do not brush yourself off and try again, then you are not doing what God wants in your life.

God has enough grace to forgive me over and over and over again, to call me “Father Abraham,” to fulfill the stars in the Heavens and the descendants on the land, not once because I deserved it, not once but because God needed me to be a representative of everyone in this world - Jew, Muslim and Christian - to be that representative. It had very little if anything to do with me, Abraham. It had to do with me the figure.

No matter what God has called you to do, don't you dare give up. Don't you dare beat yourself up one minute longer, because it isn't about you nor about me. It's about what God is going to do with you and everyone else. Let go of what is holding you back. Stop hurting yourself and start loving the God who loves you, who forgives you, who uses you - mistakes and all. Then, fall on your knees sometime tonight and thank that loving God for the healing and the love he brought me and brings each one of you.

In that Holy Name we pray and celebrate. Amen