

A few years ago in the church I was attending we got a new choir director. He was desperate. He needed more choir members, so one day I walked into the church and he said, “Ginger, why don’t you come join the choir?” I said, “I’ve never been in a choir before. I don’t think I can do it.” He said, “Sure you can.” And so I took him up on the offer.

I found being in the choir just delightful. Not having been in choir before, I learned you can’t sit anywhere. The choir director made me sit in the same place each week. It was so much fun! I loved it; we had devotions and prayer, and then all those people around me singing. After a few months I decided I might try singing. Again, the choir director wouldn’t let me sing the melody; I had to learn to sing alto because that’s the group I was in. What a learning experience.

Sometimes learning to live “in God” is like joining the choir. Choir is all about singing. It takes time to learn how to do it. Abram believed God. But it would take time to learn exactly what that meant in his day-to-day life. Abram had to learn God’s lordship. What about us? Sometimes it seems faith is easy. But in real life we must grow in relating to this God who has plans for us. Let’s look in on Abram and Sarai now. (READ Genesis 16:1-15)

Doesn’t it seem like God just stepped out of the picture? He laid out this promise and it sounded marvelous, but then the years passed and nothing. The promise has not been kept. All the faith in the world had not changed the circumstances. That tension makes faith wobbly and unsure. Unsure faith wonders what it means to trust God’s future, especially when things look bleak, as they did for Abram and Sarai. Do things look bleak in your life? Then you can understand their struggle.

Yet the whole of the New Testament speaks of Abraham’s faith. Even though we see ups and downs they learn to live believing God. From the Gospels to Romans, to Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians, to Hebrews, they all talk about Abraham’s faith as being exemplary; a marker for all of us. This story comprises the growing pains of Abram’s faith. This week’s Scripture is lesson one in lordship. Abram believed, but Abram did not yet know about lordship.

You might think that lordship means we simply submit to God, but lordship is much more. Lordship means we understand who God is in our everyday lives. The disciples did not understand this. They were anxious – anxious during storms, anxious about feeding people, anxious about not being able to heal others. How much anxiety do you live with? Abram and Sarai desperately wanted this baby, and they were anxious. That anxiety made them treat Hagar deplorably. So Genesis 16 is a story of three desperate people and their first struggle with what they perceived as the failed promise of God.

Take a look at the first verse of this chapter. “Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar.” There we have it. The verse begins with one woman and ends with the other, and Abram is caught in the middle. Sarai believed God’s promise. She just didn’t believe it was for her. Instead, she sought her own solution and decided the time was *now*. She didn’t blame God; she simply came up with her own plan. Unfortunately it blew up in her face. She tried to do the very best human effort could do, and it was woefully lacking.

How many of you, whether male or female, can relate to Sarai? I certainly can. We say, “Just this one more time I want to exercise my own plans – I’ll pray next time.” Why do we, like Sarai, have a tendency to run full speed ahead and not wait on God? God, it seems, is never early! It is so difficult to wait on what we cannot see. But God is never late either, and in this situation God seems to be stepping back for a moment, perhaps even to see what they would do. God is teaching them about Lordship. In order to become men and women of God who live by faith, we must learn to trust God and God’s timing. God brings new life, not us.

The choir sang Psalm 121. “I lift my eyes to the hills – where will my help come from?” It doesn’t mean in general that God is somehow in the hills and we look up there and God helps us. No, it means, *I lift up my eyes to the hills and I see the enemy coming over the hills, bearing down on me with all force to crush me. In anxiety I ask, “Where will my help come from?”* The Psalm expresses the reality of having impossible circumstances come against us, which we are unable to handle and can’t see a solution. The Psalmist expresses that tension.

Then the Psalmist says, “My help comes from the Lord; not just any Lord, but the One who is able to create something out of nothing, the Lord of heaven and earth.” This is the first lesson of lordship. The Lord makes something happen out of nothing. The lordship of God means God has power over impossible situations.

In the Houston Chronicle¹ recently there was a story about a man named Cleveland Turner, better known as The Flower Man. His yard is hailed as one of the nation’s best examples of African-American yard art, and featured in numerous artistic magazines. Mr. Turner has not always been an artist. He was homeless for 17 years due to severe alcoholism. Hospitalized for alcohol poisoning, God came to him in a vision one night. That vision changed his whole life by giving direction for the art. He asked God to accomplish it through him by breaking the death cycle of alcohol. Hurricane Ike damaged his yard and home but people have turned out in droves to help him recover. He is not defeated though, nor is he overcome by this setback. God defeated the enemy of alcoholism and gave him a whole new identity.

Sarai did not have such a new identity. She defined herself as barren and hopeless. And she took matters into her own hands. She convinced her man to go along with her. Her solution was a culturally acceptable thing to do; she forgot this was God’s promise. Nevertheless, Abram, one who believed God’s promise, who prayed, who was well-connected, temporarily forgot that connection as the desperation of wanting a child made him give into the unwise plan. Broken relationships resulted. Abram and Sarai were at each other’s throats, Hagar was disdainful of Sarai, and Sarai abused her.

Amazingly, Scripture says nothing negative about all this. Perhaps God does not judge our learning curve quite as negatively as we judge ourselves or others. At the same time, consequences from this decision would continue to affect Abram and Sarai for years to come. In the future the enmity that arose from the birth of Ishmael would plague all of them. God even predicts it.

¹Houston Chronicle, Friday, October 3, 2008, p. B1.

Speaking of God, where was God in all this? He was right there. But they missed it; they disconnected. They forgot about God's creative power. What about you? How connected are you? How much of God's power do you experience in your life? A great majority of Christians live disconnected from God. You are not going to experience much of God's power nor will you be certain of God's direction unless you are connected to God. That is why we are praying 4+4+4. Belief comes through connection. Trust comes through connection, as well as the sure knowledge that God loves us, just like he loved Abram, Sarai, and Hagar.

We know that God loved them because when Hagar ran away, Scripture says the angel of the Lord "found" her. That meant he was searching for her. This was not just any ordinary angel but God himself. God is closer than we know; aware of our struggles. God is here to comfort, bless, and lead us back. God seeks you out. Believe that. It's true for every one of us. Stop racing around. Simply look up.

God says to Hagar, "What are you doing here?" (The Message) That's a good place to start in prayer during your four minutes each day. Read this passage. Let God ask you that. Hagar answered honestly, "I am running away."

Go back; put up with her abuse. I see the affliction and in the midst of it I will greatly bless you.

Is this a blanket statement for all of us? No. But in this circumstance, in God's eyes it was the best for her.

Notice something else. Hagar said, "You're the God who sees me! Yes, He saw me; and then I saw him!" That encounter awakened her spiritually. It became greater than all circumstances. Be assured that no matter how small you may feel in your own eyes, you are worth it to God.

What does the future hold – our future individually, and collectively as First Presbyterian Church? The future hold something very good. How do we attain it? Lordship. Learning to trust that God knows what He is doing and that God is big enough to do it. Then submitting ourselves to Him, being willing to let Him be Lord.

What's the moral of the story? Abram stopped listening to God and instead followed cultural norms for gaining a child. He had to learn to stay connected and wait on God. Sarai hadn't "yet" produced a child so she assumed the promise was not for her. She had to learn to wait for God's timing, not her own. You shortchange yourself when you dare to think for God when we don't see the bigger picture. Hagar resorted to insulting and contemptuous behavior and then ran away from her problems.

What about you?

- Do you simply prescribe to cultural norms?
- Do you take matters into your own hands, because you cannot trust God's timing?
- Do you resort to insulting and contemptuous behavior or run away from your problems, in one way or another?

We must be honest with ourselves.

God accomplishes something in His silence in Chapter 16 and in the trials we experience. Like I had to learn the ropes of choir membership, we learn lordship through trials. God is constantly watching over us, even when he seems most silent, not condemning and judgmental; not unable to work through our mistakes but giving us the opportunity to trust him to be Lord.

Look and listen to the voice of God. Learn to let God take the lead. Understand that God's future is full of life, even when the present looks absolutely deathly.

AMEN.