

September 17th: Birth

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

If we’re ready to jump in, let’s begin with prayer.

Creator God,

You breathed life into us in the beginning, and you continue to surprise us with new forms of life and new ways of being. When we feel lost or alone, remind us of the promises that you have made to us, and how you are still active in our lives in life-giving ways. Nurture us this morning, that we might grow in our faith, and grow in hope for a future that we cannot yet see. Prepare us for the

tasks and labors that you have designed us for, and draw close to us as we navigate the unique challenges in our path. Amen.

I'm in the age bracket now where every person I know is either having a baby, raising kids, having another kid, going on vacation with their kids, or getting their kids ready for back to school. My social media feeds are full of birth announcements, and gender reveal parties, and creative birthday cake ideas, and meal plans for picky toddlers. Lately it's reached such a saturation point, and everywhere I look, my high school friends, my college friends, my seminary friends are setting down, starting a family, and buying a house in the suburbs. Just kidding on the house—we're millennials, we can't afford those.

Today we have a character in our Bible story that might relate to the situation I currently find myself in—but rather than being disoriented and slightly bemused like I am, she feels a sense of deep grief and loss.

For this story, we return to the book of Genesis, the very first book in our Bible, and the starting point of our spiritual story. Biblical scholars will be careful to tell you that Genesis is not a history book—it's not intended to be an exact account of dates, or a specific timeline—it's more like a family scrapbook, with snapshots of important events and moments that God's people want to remember and pass down.

In Genesis chapter 11, we hear the origin story of a particular branch of God's family—the line of Abram. And this man named Abram is a descendant of a man named Shem—who was one of the only human beings to survive the great flood. A significant part of this chapter is a genealogy that traces Abram's ancestry back to Shem—our biblical author records each father and son and how many years passed between them. It goes something like this—

“When Peleg had lived 30 years, he became the father of Reu. And after he became the father of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and had other sons and daughters. When Reu had lived 32 years, he became the father of Serug. And after he became the father of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and had other sons

and daughters. When Serug had lived 30 years, he became the father of Nahor. And after he became the father of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and had other sons and daughters.”

Eventually, we get to Terah, the father of Abram and his two brothers. In verses 29 and 30, we hear that both Abram and one of his brothers married, Abram to Sarai and Nahor to Milkah, but there’s an issue in the geneology: “Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.”

Nevertheless, Abram, Sarai and their nephew Lot embark on a journey to Canaan, where God has instructed them to settle. When they reach a place called Shechem, God speaks to Abram, saying, “To your offspring I will give this land.” Now, this seems like a unlikely prophecy, given Sarai’s situation, but we hear that God isn’t done with unlikely prophecies just yet. In chapter 15, God commands Abram: “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them... “So shall your offspring be.” In chapter 17, God makes a covenant with Abram, now called Abraham, and Sarai, now called Sarah. As part of this covenant, God says, “I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” And then in chapter 18, Abraham and Sarah are dwelling in their new land when they receive strange visitors. While Sarah is preparing some food for their guests, one of them says to Abraham, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

So that makes four times now, that God has communicated with Abraham and Sarah about an heir. But how is this going to be possible?

Sarai clearly doesn’t believe that it is possible, and our story from chapter 18 says, “Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Even though she has heard God’s promise, she doubts that it will come true. And can you blame her?

All of Sarah's friends, cousins, aunts, and nieces are having children—they're all birthing these great big families with dozens of kids, they're all writing down their genealogies that list hundreds of descendants, and talking about the funny things their grandkids did that week. I imagine that every time Sarah goes to a family reunion or shares a Sunday dinner, she feels more and more like an outsider. I imagine that every time she received another pregnancy announcement, she's feeling more and more like the odd woman out, the one who doesn't belong. I imagine that every time she buys or makes a gift for a baby shower, she's probably feeling like she's broke the script, through no fault of her own. Struggling with infertility has always been a lonely and isolating experience, and so I think we can all empathize with how difficult this must have been for Sarah and Abraham.

When we get to chapter 21, we read that despite the odds, God's promise has indeed been fulfilled. Sarah is expecting. Our text records, "Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him." Sarah responds to this miraculous birth by saying, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me... Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

So this passage is an exciting moment for Abraham and Sarah, and an important moment for this family that has been the primary subject of Genesis. Not only has Sarah birthed a son, she has provided an heir, a way for the family's name and legacy to be passed down. The story of God's people will continue, because of this baby boy named Isaac. Isaac represents hope for his family, hope for his people. And even though the journey to this pregnancy was full of heartache and longing and anxious waiting, God was still at work in surprising and joyous ways. God was still at work, bringing a new creation into those situations of lifelessness, laboring to bring about a lifegiving future.

However, as we look for meaning in this passage, I can acknowledge that this is a complicated story—especially for those of us who also find ourselves in

situations of infertility or who have endured experiences of loss or grief. Some of us might have stories that don't end with a miraculous surprise, or we might still be waiting for that miraculous surprise to happen. Some of us are not biologically capable of giving birth, and some of us have chosen not to have children for a variety of different reasons. Some of us may not resonate with this particular kind of grief, and that's okay.

So when I say that our verb today is birth—I don't necessarily mean birth in the labor and delivery, new born baby sense—but in the broader, more cosmic, more personal sense. No matter our personal reproductive choices or realities, all of us have something to contribute to God's story—all of us part of a spiritual lineage, and all of us play a role in the divine legacy.

And because of that, all of us are capable of birthing new ideas, new possibilities, new excitement, and new hope into the world. Every single human being, no matter their age, shape, size, life experience, or background has the potential to birth a movement, or a mission, or a life changing act that can be passed down. Each of us carries that power, just like Sarah carried Isaac.

We all have labors of love that are baked into our DNA—we have passions and projects and skills that we've developed because of who God has made us to be. We have innate wirings and unique gifts that we bring to the table, and we have the creative energy to bring into being fresh stories, and songs, and stunning artwork and delicious meals and abundant gardens. We have the God given ability to teach and encourage and lead and support—all of which are nurturing acts.

So here is your task for this week: birth something new and beautiful into the world. Labor to create something that brings life and joy. Bring something glorious into being. Even if you find yourself waiting on promises to be fulfilled, or you are grieving your current circumstances, I hope that you can trust that God is still at work. And because you are God's beloved child, hope for the world lives in you.

Amen.