

## The Scripts of our Lives

Genesis 18:1-15

Jennie Ott □ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC □ 15 June 2008  
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It was in my college years when I first realized we don't necessarily get things all figured out.

I remember clear as day sitting in the office of my history adviser.  
It was the first week of sophomore year,  
and she was newly minted Ph.D. out of the University of Virginia.  
Her office still smelled of new paint.  
Her books were neatly arranged by height and topic,  
Civil War History, the Gilded Age, the Suffragist Movement.  
She spoke fast, with a slight southern accent.  
She was young and quirky, and I liked her instantly.

Well we got to talking. She asked me what I wanted to do—a minister I told her—and I asked her if she had always wanted to be a professor.

Well, not exactly, she said, and really, I'm not sure how long I'll be teaching. What I'd really like to do is write historical screenplays.

Here she was 28 years old,  
the cream of the PhD crop,  
having secured an excellent job,  
and already she was thinking of changing her path.  
Huh, I thought to myself. I didn't know you could do that.

A year later, I had another such insight.

This time I was in Denver, living at a retreat center.  
One night I sat in a prayer group with a bunch of women ages 20 to 65.  
One 55-year old woman started telling some of her story.  
Pretty soon she started talking about how she didn't like who she was,  
she didn't believe in herself,  
how all her life she had been plagued by self-doubt and unworthiness,  
and I remember thinking,  
Huh, I didn't know you could still have these issues at 55.  
I thought they all got worked out by 25, for sure.

It seems that some things take a lifetime to work out,  
whether it's who we are or what we want to do.

And much of how we work these things out  
has to do with what we tell ourselves.  
There are certain scripts we have in our heads—  
stories or phrases or narratives within each one of us  
that inform just how it is we live.

For my professor, hers went something like:  
"The world is my oyster" and "I can change my life if I want."  
For my friend in Denver, hers were more like,  
"I am not good enough" and "Things will always be this way."

All of us have these scripts,  
some psychologists call these life commandments –  
the phrases that are our fundamental stepping stones.  
While they may be tied somewhat to genetics,  
most of the time they are grounded in the reality of our lives and our lived experience.

It's like the woman hurt over and over again by various partners, who thinks,  
"No one will ever love me."  
It's the kid whose mom walked out when he was six, who thinks  
"Everyone is going to leave me."  
It's the business executive who puts in 80 hours a week,  
because he's learned over the years that "failure is unacceptable."

These scripts have power, because they shape who we are,  
and because they become the lens through which we see the world.

My guess is Sarah and Abraham had some of these scripts, too.  
For Sarah, I imagine it was "I am barren"  
a story she probably struggled with most of her life,  
that likely plagued her view of herself  
that caused pangs of jealousy when she caught sight of the rounded bellies of other  
women.

For in a world where power and property and pedigree  
were linked to the size of one's family,  
it was a real sore spot that she didn't have kids.  
And in world, where God had promised Abraham that he would be a father of many nations,  
it was a bit ironic that Sarah could not bear children.

I think Sarah's script has a lot to do with why she reacts the way she does  
when the visitors come by in this morning's text.  
Here are three men who come with promising news,  
but in Sarah's eyes, it's old news.

It's been some 25 years since she first heard about God's promise of a child,  
but there's been no change to her womb,  
no evidence of offspring.  
And in this case facts seem to speak much louder than promises,  
for the truth is she has not been able to get pregnant  
and now she is long past the childbearing age.

It's no wonder that Sarah laughs  
as she sits there at the entrance to her tent.  
You can almost see her, just out of view,  
her wrinkled hand wiping her brow with a cloth  
as she kneads bread for the guest.  
Then she overhears the visitors talking about the promised child.

And she laughs. "New Life out of this old body? I don't think so."

It's the laughter of doubt, of impossibility  
maybe even of a cynic,  
in the face of such blatant pipe dreams.

But who can blame her?  
What evidence is there to the contrary?  
What hope possibly exists?

Her script has a tight grip,  
and I imagine it's only some time later,  
when those first waves of morning sickness begin to wash over her,  
when her belly becomes taut with her ripening child,  
that her laughter of doubt begins turn to laughter of joy.  
Only then, does she begin to let go of the scripts that have bound her.

It seems to me that when we are used to a certain way of being,  
a certain way of doing,  
a certain way of encountering the world,  
it's sometimes hard to change our perspective.

When we are used to our own barrenness,  
it's hard sometimes to trust that any new life can come from it.

My hunch is that there is something of each of us in this story.  
Like Abraham and Sarah, we, too,  
live in the overarching narrative of God's promise.

God creates us, loves us, has vision and purpose for us,  
yet, we spend most of our time neck deep  
in the day-to-day realities of our lives —  
realities of our own barrenness  
in whatever ways they take shape for us:  
The barrenness of a job that no longer excites us.  
The barrenness of a body that slows us down with its arthritis and aching knees.  
The barrenness of a relationship broken and hurting.

We get stuck in the reality of these deserts,  
the wellsprings of life drying up before our very eyes,  
and we forget that things can change  
that new life can spring even from dead ends.

It seems that God wants to remind Sarah and Abraham of that.  
After she laughs, the visitor asks,  
"Why did Sarah laugh and say 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old.' Is anything too wonderful for God?"

It's a question that hangs in the air for them,  
Unanswered, unresolved.  
It's a question of faith, really.  
"Is anything too wonderful for God?"

Now there's a risk in preaching this story,  
because we know how the ending turns out.  
We know Sarah becomes pregnant with Isaac,  
and Isaac goes on to have Jacob  
and Jacob goes on to have Joseph  
and a multitude of nations is formed.

It's would be easy to say that everything works out according to our desires,  
but most of us know from our own experience that it isn't always true.  
Things don't always go exactly as we hope,  
perfectly in our time,  
precisely to our plan.

God made Abraham and Sarah wait,  
a long time  
and it was difficult for them to live in the tension of the promise,  
of what could be, but was not yet.  
They had nothing to go on but the word of God,  
and the hope that God would be with them  
even in the midst of the barrenness.

And so, like Abraham and Sarah, you and I live in the tension, too,  
trying to believe our God, trust our God,  
trying to welcome God's presence in our barrenness,  
trying to look for the newness that might spring up in our dried places.

It's no secret that we, here are First Church, sit in a place of tension,  
and that our wonderful minister of music sits in a place of tension.

For you and me and Tom-- all of us--are children of God's promise,  
the promise that God will be with us  
in all our transitions  
especially as we wait in barrenness for new life.

Tom, like Abraham and Sarah, is trying to be attentive to God's call,  
which is ever unfolding,  
and which is a call that now invites new life in New Jersey,  
a call that now invites new roles as he cares for his mother,  
a call that now invites new opportunities for composing and playing the music he so dearly  
loves.

But, like Abraham and Sarah, the details aren't exactly worked out yet.  
There is an apartment yet to be found  
a job yet to be secured  
and so Tom steps out in faith,  
going in the shelter of God's trust  
waiting with God for what will unfold  
and leaving with our prayers for new growth in Tom's life.

And like Tom, we, too, try to be attentive to the newness to which God is calling us.  
Many of us already feel the barrenness of Tom's departure,  
wondering what will happen to the music here?

Will anyone pull out all the stops the way Tom does?  
What will be birthed in his place?

We don't know what is coming,  
but we do know the One who promises to be with us  
in the waiting, in the transition.  
It is the same One, who promised to Abraham and Sarah,  
In due season, I will bring new life.

The question is can we trust God to unfold our story?

Sarah had her script, "I am barren."  
And left to her own devices,  
that would have been all she wrote.  
But God wanted to pen a different ending,  
one that challenged everything in her reality.

What scripts do we have?  
As individuals?  
As a congregation?

Do they bring us life, the way my professor's did,  
who believed "The world is my Oyster?"  
Or do they pull us down, like Sarah's did, like my friend's did,  
who thought "Nothing can ever change."

It seems that sometimes our scripts might get in the way  
of what God is trying to do in our lives.  
That sometimes our reality isn't the whole story, yet.  
That sometimes God is there  
just waiting with us,  
waiting to unfold mystery right before our eyes.

How might we  
listen for the One  
who calls us to a different story?

How might we  
suspend our scripts long enough  
to really hear the challenge of faith:  
"Is anything too wonderful for God?"

Amen.