



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

This way forward

(NOT SO) HEROES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:

From Sarai to Sarah

1 Peter 2:9-10

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For the past several weeks we have been exploring those Biblical stories that feature people of great, even profound, weakness, sin, and fear, but, at the same time, are used by God as crucial cogs in the plan of salvation. These are people that God uses in spite of, or perhaps even because of, their faults; people like Sarah.

From the beginning we see that she was a person of courage. When Abraham hears God's call "to go from your country and your kindred to the land that I will show you," she goes! She does not insist upon remaining close to her kindred, with all the safety and security it brings.

When Abraham acts like a spineless jellyfish, not once but twice before two foreign kings, she does not leave him! Sarah was a person of historic beauty, so much so, that Abraham was afraid a King might be willing to kill him in order to take her as a wife. In fact, he encouraged her to play the role of his sister to save his own hide – knowing well that the King would take her for his harem and to his bedchambers. Fortunately, the Lord visits fear and wrath upon these kings so that she is released. Despite serving her up as bait to a king, Sarah continues to stand with Abraham.

And yet, Sarah also has faults and not just minor ones. Her trouble begins with a failure to trust. That not-so heroic part of ourselves is the one that listens to the voice within rather than the voice above. The voice above told her she would bear a son. The voice within told her she was too old. The voice above reassured her and urged patience. The voice within told her that unless she acted it would never come to pass.

You remember the story. As a result of her lack of trust and patience, she urged Abraham to lay with Hagar. She becomes jealous, probably beat her, and then sends her into the wilderness to die.

Yes, Sarah was a person like most of us, filled with faults, but we shall see that, because of God's faith in her, the plan of salvation continued. We normally think about our faith in God. But the Bible is really about God's faith in us and, misplaced as it is, God uses it to turn the world around.

In the midst of Sarai's greatest failure, God changed her name. According to some scholars her original name, Sarai, means strength or power. Her newly given name, means princess or royalty.

God was making it unequivocally clear. She would be the mother of kings and nations. Sarah was 90 years old at the time!

Which reminds me, this Sanctuary is about the same age. The same age when Sarah gave birth to something new; when she gave birth to a new future for her people and ultimately for the world.

Ninety years and more ago in 1925 it began here. Listen to some of the history,

In 1922, the congregation called Dr. Henry Wade DuBose to be its pastor. In only a short time after he had arrived, there was in this growing congregation need for a new and larger church building. Mr. Andrew M. Law, son of our first pastor, was chairman of the building committee. In presenting his plans to the church, he said, "Spartanburg is destined to grow; Presbyterianism will grow with it. The time has come in the history of First Presbyterian Church when something big should be done . . . Let us go forward in our plans and dreams for erecting a magnificent church." Ground was broken on our present sanctuary in 1925.

As a result of their courage and generosity, we have this beautiful, sacred place. It is a testament to their faithfulness that no radical changes are needed. It is a testament to their wisdom that no catastrophic repairs have beset this congregation. But we do have needs to modify this space that will enable us to glorify God, even more effectively, for the next ninety years and beyond!

Through Sarah's child, generations would come and go over the course of thousands of years to be blessed. Through your giving, birth to something new through these renovations, this church will continue to bless thousands and beyond – for who knows how long – maybe thousands of years as well! But it is for here and now that we are called to act. The time is now to take bold action.

But we don't feel like the hero or saint. We don't feel like royalty. We are broken people, many of us; some have experienced divorce, the loss of children, addictions; we are afraid, afraid of the future, afraid for our loved ones. We are worried about how we will care for our aging parents, how to fund our children's college education, or how this country will find peace and harmony. And when beloved saints of the community, like Rob Chapman, are torn from us, it sometimes seems like too much.

And that is exactly why we come to this place; not because we are heroes or saints, but to celebrate this wondrous love God has for us, despite our failings, to receive this amazing grace. Sara is given her special name well before she lives up to it; God can present us with our noble destiny even before we have begun to live into it, that is the blessing of God in Jesus Christ.

God does not call heroes or saints, but broken, faulted people like Sarah, like me and like you.

Sarah's story shows us that it does not matter who we are, where we come from, our age. God's faith in us can produce changes in us that can result in miraculous outcomes. Sarah became royalty but, in Christ Jesus, so are all of us! This is what Peter declared in his first letter,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

God has made us holy through the gift of Christ Jesus. For this, we are infinitely blessed and, thus, called to mighty acts in his name!

Abraham and Sarah were given an historic blessing; the land, the promise, the descendants. We have a historic promise; this Sanctuary, this campus, this legacy given to us by those who came before. In this campus, like Sarah was, we have a rare thing of beauty, in all the country; a pearl of great price even, but it only has value in so far as we use it; use it for God's purposes; these renovations will enable us to do so. It will grow our ability to worship God; it will grow our ability to discover our children's gifts; it will grow our ability to welcome visitors, it will grow our ability in mission to serve the community.

Since we are all royalty in the kingdom of God, we are all called to be a part of bringing these renovations forward – for us, for our children, and for our children's children – for generations to come! Any many of you have already answered. Even before this campaign was officially launch today, leaders of the Renovation Team and of the Session and the Diaconate and others have come forward and already pledged \$1,869,430 towards our 3.2 Million Dollar goal! They have got us going, but it's going to take the rest of us to get to the finish line.

So, the time has come, to create a choir loft that is safe, that is expanded, and that is arranged for optimal acoustics.

The time has come to upgrade the audio and lightening, so we might all hear and see and so that those who join us online can enjoy a fuller experience of our worship.

The time has come to create gathering space, so that we can enjoy the spiritual fellowship of the people of God.

The time has come to upgrade Fogartie Hall, so that MorningSong has a place for *worship* and not a temporary set up, as if they were Israel in the wilderness gathering in a Tent! The time has come, especially, to put a full sound system in for MorningSong, so we can experience the fullness of the Praise Band's gifts!

Remember, Sarah grows past her weakness and becomes a steadfast and steady matriarch of Israel. God can use anyone who is willing to give something of themselves. Sarah gave up her home, her security. She gave herself over to the will of God. Rob gave up so much of his life to better the community. And when people like that have left a whole, we all have to step in it. Hero or not, God can use anyone willing to offer something of value of themselves to the Lord.

We have the call, a call in Scout-like fashion, to leave this place better than we found. Let's do it in faith. Let's do it in love. Let's do it to the glory of God. The time has come! Let's answer the call. Amen.