

## 3.3.2024 Sermon

# Sarah's Journey of Faith | Hebrews 11:11-12

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

life, sarah, abraham, faith, happening, god, promised, child, feel, years, moment, tents, helped, hebrews, repercussions, morning, hagar, share, messengers, journey

### SPEAKERS

Rev. Terri Moss Witmyer

Rev. James Bady, Rev. Saundra Anderson, Elder Janis Bady, Elder Matt Kistler

I'm so glad to be here with you all this morning. We're going to keep looking at Hebrews 11. We've been talking through some of the heroes of the faith, looking at these figures from the Old Testament stories from ancient times, and asking, what can we learn about a life of faith from these people? Today, we're going to look at a woman named Sarah and think about her journey through life as we know it from the ancient stories in the Old Testament in Genesis.

I just want to start off by reading what Hebrews 11 says about Sara and her story. Now, she was the wife of Abraham. Hebrews 11, verses 11-12, say this: "And by faith, even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so, from this one man, and he is good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and as countless as the sand on the seashore." I love some of that imagery—the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. These two verses paint a very smooth journey and a very tidy picture. I'm here to tell you this morning that when we look at Sarah's story back in Genesis, it's not quite this easy and not quite this smooth. It kind of leaves me wondering, did Sarah actually have faith?

Because it's a lot messier through Genesis, you know, a lot of the Bible. Most of the stories in Genesis really focus on the male figures in the story. Right. And I think this story is no different. I think most of the story, we kind of see it through Abraham's lens. And Sarah is kind of like an also-ran; she was there. And we get little tidbits of "Oh, and she felt this way," and "Oh, here she said this," and "Oh, here she laughed." But we're kind of like having a peek behind what's written on the page to kind of think through what was Sara's journey through all of this, that was happening in her and Abraham's lives.

So, in honor of Women's History Month, let's think about Sarah's life through the story. Abraham, we've been talking about him the last couple of weeks. He grew up in this place called Ur, which seems like it was in Iraq. And it seems like he and his family, his father's household, were pretty wealthy. And they heard the call to move and go to this promised land. Right. And so, at some point, Abraham's father ups and moves to about halfway there, to a place called Haran.

And so, then they're there in Haran. And then at some point in the story, we're told that Abraham heard the call, the same call that was given to his father. "Keep going, go to a place where I'll show you and go to a place where you don't exactly know where it is yet. Just go, and I'll let you know when you get there." And so, they did. And Abraham, Scripture tells us, Abraham and his wife, and his nephew and his whole household moved and started traveling. And as we heard last week from Matt, they lived in tents and they traveled. And when they left that place in Haran, which probably was a pretty comfortable life at that point, Scripture tells us that Abraham was 75, which would make Sarah 65.

I take these ages with a grain of salt, you guys. I don't know. Let's not get hung up on that. But I have to imagine that Sarah, as the wife of a wealthy guy, Abraham was living a pretty comfortable life, right? But she went with them and lived in tents, which, as a woman, probably meant that her job was to set up house here, and then here, and then here, and then here. And if any of you guys have moved house, I don't know about you, but I only want to do it maybe like two or three times in a lifetime. It's enough. But they were constantly on the move. And so that was her life then. And she goes with him into the unknown, living in tents, traveling with him.

Here's the thing: in a time and culture that designated a woman's worth by the children that she could produce, Sarah didn't have any children. Despite her husband's wealth and status, despite her reported extreme beauty, she didn't have the thing that gave her value in her society, and assumedly, the thing that she wanted most. So, at some point, God makes a promise to Abraham. And we get this whole scene of God speaking with Abraham. But he's making a promise to Sarah too at this time. And God says that Abraham would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore. And so, from that day on, every day, they lived in tents, millions of grains of sand underfoot, every single day. And every night, millions of stars overhead. Can you imagine how beautiful, before electricity, with no light pollution in the desert, the clear air, millions of stars every single night? All reminders of a promise yet unfulfilled.

At some point, Sara loses hope. And she reaches for a cultural practice of her day to fill in the gap. And she sends her enslaved woman Hagar as a stand-in to have sex with Abraham. And

the resulting child, Hagar's son Ishmael, was then in their culture legally considered Sarah's descendant. Now, I want you to think about this: Ishmael is considered to be the father of the Arab world, the ancestor of many peoples of the Arab world. And think—I just think about—and Pastor James brought it to my attention this morning, that the decisions that we make as we're traveling the journey of our lives, have impact and repercussions far beyond what we even get to see in our lives. And I don't know. I don't know what would have happened if Sarah hadn't decided to do this, right? And it was like perfectly acceptable in her culture. And yet it brought strife into their household because she actually wound up hating the results. She hated that she didn't have a child and this slave woman Hagar got to have this child, and it became a whole thing in Sarah's life and in her household. And it's a whole thing in the world today. There's still strife among brothers, among people who are related. And so that's just something for us to consider. Our decisions and actions have repercussions that roll on through the generations. No pressure. And yet God brings everything into an opportunity for good, I believe, no matter what we choose and decide.

So, after this whole thing, God appears to Abraham and speaks to him again, and reiterates that Sara herself is going to be the mother of Abraham's descendants. And Abraham, at that time, thinks to himself, that's impossible. He laughs to himself. The Scripture says, "It's too late; they're too old." And then, a little bit down the line, some messengers come by where they have pitched their tents. These three messengers, and it's thought that they're like angels, like coming, bringing a message from God. And they come by and in conversation with Abraham, they say the same thing: Sarah is going to have a child.

And we get a little peek behind the scenes, and it says Sarah was listening behind the tent flap. She was like in the tent, listening to this conversation. And it said, "She laughed and said, 'That is totally impossible.'" And the messengers call her out on it and say, "No, it's going to happen, Sarah, you don't have to laugh, because this is actually going to happen." And it does happen. About a year after that, Sarah, Scripture tells us, conceives and gives birth to Isaac, who would eventually become the grandfather of the 12 tribes of Israel. And at that time, she was 90, and Abraham was 100.

Again, I take all of this with a grain of salt, because did Sarah actually conceive a child at the age of 90? Maybe it was an actual biological miracle. Maybe, in these hazy ancient times, age worked differently. Maybe through years of storytelling, the reported ages of these patriarchs turned into symbolic numbers. I don't know. And I'm not gonna get hung up on that this morning. And I don't want you to either. But my thought is, as we're looking at this, these, the unfolding life of Sarah, let's think about this story and ask what we can learn about faith, from Sarah and Abraham's journey through infertility, and eventual childbearing.

I'm going to be super honest and tell you guys, as many of my fellow preachers have also shared, I've struggled with this assignment. I am someone who experienced infertility for years. And I know I'm not the only person in this room for whom this could be a painful topic. And let me tell you, in case you don't already know, probably, people often, generally unknowingly, say things that really hurt when you're trying unsuccessfully to have a baby. And for me, starting even when I was a young single woman, wanting to find a partner, and watching so many friends welcoming children into the world, and later, after I was married to my sweet husband, Benjamin, I thought it was going to happen and then it just kept not happening. And that really hurt. And I'm sure many of you know that pain too.

Finally, for me, with some medical intervention, I did get pregnant and I had a baby about a year and a half ago. And hilariously, I was surprised to find out that the fulfillment of many years of longing is actually the most difficult thing I've ever done. I don't know why I was surprised. Y'all told me, but I don't know. I just thought I was surprised. So here we are. I share this part of my story just to reflect. Life has twists and turns that are sometimes completely unexpected and unwanted. And when I read about Sarah in the Bible, on a Sleep, that's what comes to the surface. For me. That's what I think about.

Even though it looks really neat and tidy on the surface, especially here in Hebrews 11, there are a lot of crazy loop-de-loops and U-turns on this ride of Sarah's life underneath these words. And what I want us to think about this morning, is this: What does faith look like for you? When life is throwing you for a loop? And when things are happening or not happening, that are not what you expected. And when our attempts to make something happen just turn into a whole mess. And when things that we thought would be easy turn out to be very, very difficult when our expectations are just not realized, in reality. Can you guys relate? Am I the only one for whom life has not been a straightforward and pleasant journey? Totally joking. I know that everybody. I think that that is a fable.

So, I don't have the answers about this stuff. But I just first of all wanted to acknowledge that, like hurts, it's these things are, can be painful to think about. And as I was sitting with this, this week, I just thought, "What do I actually do, when I'm confronted with the reality that things are happening or not happening the way that I wanted them to?" So, I just want to share a few things that have helped me when I've been on the journey of life not happening as expected. Some ways of walking by faith, when I don't know what the heck is happening.

And I want to ask you all to join me in thinking about this. And I also have asked the elders to if you would like to share with us some of what you do when life is happening, not as you expected it to because, and I'm going to share these things. But I realized as I was kind of writing them down, these are the things these are some of the things that helped me. And I very much have my perspective and my background and where I've come from, right. And

other people are different. And so, I wanted us to hear from more than just me this morning when we're thinking about some of the answers to that question.

So, first, when things aren't happening, or they are happening, but not the things you wanted to happen. For me, one of the first ways to connect with God through faith is to be honest about it. Because for me, I'm I like to pretend that everything's okay. Especially when it's not. And, and that's just me, and maybe that's some of you guys, I don't not everybody does that, but I certainly do. And I think that I was raised in a white American Evangelical culture that had some kind of a PR message that said, if you do the right things, then you will get this life and you should definitely want this life and therefore you should do these things. And so, I, as a good little girl, did those things and then I didn't get this life. And then I was like, well, what the heck, right? So that was my experience, part of it.

And this life is hashtag "blessed and happy." And, um, but sometimes life doesn't give us happy and it is okay to be honest about that is something that I have had to learn and that I need to be honest with myself, first of all, and then with God, about how I'm feeling about things. And judiciously to be honest with those people who are close to me. Because pretending that everything's okay, and I love it all, will just distance myself from myself. And that will allow lots of opportunity for mental health breakdowns. And I've also learned that distancing myself from myself, is a great way to also distance myself from God. Because I can only relate to God through myself. So being honest, especially about negative feelings, because those are the ones that I would like to lie about. That is an important first step for me.

Next, in my mind, when things are happening, or not happening, and it's beyond my power to control any of it, I have found that it's important for me to find an avenue to channel my strength. For me, not being able to make something happen, makes me want to go into a depressive shutdown. And, but what really helps me in that moment, is to get up and do some stuff. And from artistic pursuits to physical challenges, to friendship development, to finding out how to be of service in my community, getting up and doing some stuff has helped me to like keep living my life when I'm in that place. Even if there is an area of my life where I feel powerless and frustrated.

And the third thing that comes to mind for me is making space to receive God's empathy and compassion. For me. That has been huge. And I've experienced that God has empathy for us when we suffer. Empathy, like, not only does God understand my hurt, but God is actually experiencing it and feeling it with me. And I have to wonder if Sarah knew about that? I suspect she didn't. But maybe she did. We don't really see that in Scripture. Or was God maybe more distant for her in her time, and without the lens of Christ, to understand God more.

So those are three things that really helped me. But I know that I'm me. And other people are different from me. And so, I do want to just invite my fellow elders to answer this question for us so that we can get more than one viewpoint this morning. What helps you to connect with God through faith? When life is not happening, as you expected that it would? Anybody want to jump up?

**Rev. James Bady**

Thank you, Terry. I want to share, not really my story, but the story of Miss Cindy, who creates tours with the kids. She helped the conversation by providing a new context. And that context is: What do you do, or how does faith exist for you, if you have no hope? The question was asked to her, "What do you do?" And I say, "Well, I never had any expectations in my life." "Like, why?" "Because everything around me told me there was no hope. I didn't want to do well in school because I saw people who did and sacrificed in school and still got nothing in the end." This is a very logical response. If what I'm sacrificing for provides me nothing, then do nothing.

So, what is the faith challenge? When you're in the middle of despair, when everything around you says, "This is it. There is nothing better"? In this conversation of the elders at that point in time, the challenge of faith for the individuals that are in moments, or in society, in parts of life, when there is no better to aspire to, their challenge is to open themselves up to hope, to open themselves up to the possibilities, that the promises could be true for someone, and that someone may be me. That, for them, is extremely harmful, potentially dangerous. Because everything you see says you're not going to get anything anyway.

So, the way they deal with it, shut down. No emotional connection, no connection with God, no connection with there being a better way or something better they could have. And similarly, I work with some young at-risk youth, particularly men, that that is their modus operandi. They operate this way to protect themselves from the pain of disappointment. From the pain of "I told you, all that work is for naught." And so, the challenge for them in those moments is to open yourself up to actually be hurt. And that is their faith walk with God.

**Rev. Terri Moss Witmyer**

Thank you very much, Pastor James.

Yes, come on, Janice. Yeah, that just speaks to me so loudly that where we're coming from our lives, has a huge bearing on what it looks like to connect with faith in God. And that's amazing. And beautiful and challenging.

**Elder Janis Bady**

Okay, so the question is, what do I do to reconnect to my faith or something you connect to?

**Rev. Terri Moss Witmyer**

How do you connect to God through faith when life isn't happening as you thought?

**Elder Janis Bady**

Alright, so first, I cry. For the first time, I cry, and I get really mad. But then, I remember my favorite Bible verse, which is Jeremiah 29:11. And God knows the plans He has for me, plans to prosper me and not harm me, plans to give me a hope and a future. And I remind God that You said You're gonna take care of me. I just say, "You said You were gonna take care of me. So, we need to work this out." And then, you know, I listen.

And then I go into something similar to what you were saying, right? So, I need a physical outlet. I cannot just sit in it. So, I find something. It could just be, "I'm really mad right now. So, I just need to clean my house," or something, clean a room, not really my whole house, but a room. Or, you know, I need to go help somebody else. Do something that helps someone else. And through that processing, I'm getting, like, answers. I'm getting solutions. I'm getting, "Take a step. Just be brave to take a step and it's okay if it's a mistake, but just take the step."

But not, I look really, live kind of a simple faith, that God, you're going to take care of me and it's going to work out. And if it's not the end, if it hasn't worked out, it's not the end. It's going to work out. That's what I do.

**Rev. Terri Moss Witmyer**

Thank you very much, Janice. Any other elders want to chime in? Sandra?

**Rev. Sandra Anderson**

For me, I started off like on baby I let myself feel whatever emotion I want to feel. There's a whole spectrum of emotions. And I got out of the idea that life is just supposed to be happy. If I want to be sad, if I want to be mad, whatever, I allow myself to be in that moment. I got to let go of the expectation that life is happily ever after.

And God was real, Jesus when He said like, "Hey, this is what you will experience in life." And somehow, we psyched ourselves to say no, it's prosperity. We're gonna live happy lives and I'm like, "No, he told us, believe it." So, when I'm going through stuff, it's like this is what he

said, like I'm supposed to just live, happiness is what we make it. And at the end of the day, God never leaves me.

And a couple of years ago, I got Jeremiah 29:11 on this wrist, and obedience on this wrist, because when I'm in despair, I'm usually with my head down. And I have my hands together like this. And I look down. And it's a reminder for me that he does know the plan. And I must be obedient to His plans. I stopped trying to fit God into my plans, and put myself into God's plans.

And I assess what I can control, I control and the rest, I kind of sometimes do like Adam and say, the woman you gave me, the job you gave me, I put it back on him. And I say, "You gave me this stuff. So, you work it out, I make it God's problem." And that's how I get through. I say, "You gave me this. So, you fix it." And it's been working for me for the last five years. I say, "you gave this, your problem. What you want me to do about it? I'm gonna do it. And the rest is your problem." So, it works for me, it may work for you.

### **Rev. Terri Moss Witmyer**

Thank you. Matthew Kessler.

### **Elder Matt Kistler**

Indeed, I think I really liked where you started, Terri. I have to be able to express what I feel, to be able to see it, to be able to wrap my head around it because often, part of me is feeling something but it isn't yet named. You know, you can feel anxiety. Why is that? What is that? For me, writing is an important outlet to help me put it down and name it. And by naming it, I can see it's no more or less than this. And if there's more, I keep writing. But that helps me contain the feeling that I feel into something tangible, that I can look at and express. I am upset because of this. I wanted this and I'm getting this. So, I really liked that idea of honesty. And I think for me, that's part of my response.

And then I often, similar to what others have said, go back to what God has promised me. I believe, very personally, that God has spoken things to me over my life, specific not just like, oh, you know, some sort of vague idea that's out there, that's in a song. And so, I mean, it could be in a song, but God has words that he's given me. And I go back to those and remember, you know, God, it's almost a deconstruction of "God hasn't promised me everything. But he has promised me something." And I can hold on to that and remind myself. For example, one promise God has for me is, "I will use you up." My fear is the abilities I have will not be used, you know, that they'll just remain dormant. God's promised to use me up. And so, I can trust in that. And so, it's like those kinds of personal things that you say, "Okay, you're here. Everything else, I can trust that you will move through me in the ways you've promised."



And then everything else, that's just a narrative I'm creating: life will be easy, or my job, my career path will be straight, or I'll get to do the things I want to do, or my family will be stable, whatever narrative it is. I kind of go back to what exactly has God promised me and usually release the rest.

And then, for me, the doing part, I am a natural doer. And so, I have to balance doing with not doing, kind of almost as a counterpart to you. I will always immediately want to do things to fix things, to feel control. And so, I agree that for me, it's good to take steps and start getting perspective that this problem isn't all my life, but just a little piece of it. And when I am engaging in other things, I can see other pieces of my life but always reminding myself that my doing isn't what's fixing me. Like, I don't need to do to find peace.

### **Rev. Terri Moss Witmyer**

I love hearing the different voices around the table. Because it's not the same for all of us; we are each unique. And therefore, our relationship with God is unique too. Each one of us has a different relationship with God because each one of us is different. God may be the same and may be reaching out with huge love toward every single one of us. But the way that we relate to God is going to be different for each one of us. Yes. Yes, he can appreciate everyone.

I just couldn't not share. This week, I was in a position where I literally experienced everything Janice shared. Those were my ways for years of responding in a moment of crisis, trauma, or when things fall apart that I can't control. I could tell you a million stories about raising six children, like when somebody breaks a bone or something goes down. And the immediate response to God, and my whole response has changed for whatever reason for the last few years, for many reasons. And my lens, my faith lens, has changed. So, I just wanted to offer some testimony that if you are in that situation right now, my biggest hope for everybody is that no one feels alone, and that they have somebody, one person, two people, three people, whoever you have, you can reach out to in a moment like that, and say, "I'm empty of faith, I have nothing."

Because this week, I'll just say, I texted Dana, Pastor Tracy, and Kevin. And immediately, I can't even tell you, it was like I had nothing. I literally said, "I have no hope for this situation. Nothing I can pray at the end." And I received a sentence or two from each of them that just totally opened my heart and mind back up to remembering what it feels like to hope. And what is possible. When we just put out there that honesty that Terry said, and about, like our feelings and the freak out within and get encouragement from somebody, literally pastor JC said, "that's okay, I have faith for this situation for you." And so, I couldn't help but think of that

in all that was. Yeah, community is a part of how we do this when we hit the bottom. So, thank you. Yes, amen.

You know, if we just look at Hebrews 11. It seems like it's saying that Sarah and Abraham had a child because they believed hard enough, or something. And I think that can be kind of triggering to read, especially if we're struggling with life, especially if we're experiencing infertility. But I think that when we look at how Genesis tells Sarah's story, it doesn't appear that she really thought it would happen. It doesn't seem like it depended on her at all. And, weirdly, that gives me comfort.

Because to me, that says the things that happen in our lives, good or bad, are not always dependent on us. Yes, our choices have repercussions. And yet there are many things that are out of our control. And that's weirdly comforting to me. These days, I tend to believe that life is more chaotic and less prescriptive; that things happen or don't happen, no matter our adherence to the rules of religion or culture. I guess the prosperity gospel of my youth has been washed out of me, mostly by the tides of life. But what I do know for sure, and what? When I look back now that I'm middle-aged? Sorry, slightly inside joke. But anyway, now that I am 42 years old, I look back with a little bit more perspective. And I can see that God has always been right there with me, no matter what was happening. Yes, I see so many of you nodding your heads. And that's what it means to say, "All I have needed, your hand has provided." That's what it means to say, "Great is your faithfulness."

It's to be able to look at our lives and say, so many things were out of my control. But you, God, knew what I needed in that moment. And you were right there with me in that moment. And that's the thing that I know for sure, is that God is always right there with us, no matter what happens, that God is always loving us completely, is always giving us the strength that we need for each moment. I think that hope, deferred expectation, and desire unrealized, it can be a hardening agent for our hearts. And yet, I think that posture of faith that chooses to believe that God is not against us, but in fact is with us in our pain and confusion, that that's the antidote to the bitterness that could creep in. Put simply, life can smack us around. And we may never know why things happen or do not happen. But staying open to God's presence with us. And God's utter love toward us, is our lifeline, no matter what happens.

And so now we're going to move into our time together at the communion table. And here's what I want us to be thinking about as we come to the table together this morning. I want us to remember that God has empathy for us and with us, that it's not just that God understands how we're feeling about whatever is going on in life or whatever has happened in life. It's that God is feeling it with us. And as a result, we don't have to bear our burdens by ourselves because literally like God is inside of us bearing the burden with us. Does that connect with you guys at all?