

Sunday 11 June 2017

Otumoetai Baptist Church

Couples in the Bible

Abraham and Sarah

God and His Plan

When I ask the question “What makes a great couple”, I wonder what comes to mind for you.

Is it the pairing of two people who see the best in each other and try to bring that out?

Is it two people who decide to make it their priority to serve one another and put the other first?

Is it the fun and laughter and laughing at oneself that easily exists in a relationship?

Is it a firm resolute commitment to one another to forsake all others?

Or is it something else?

I wonder if we asked Hollywood what makes a great couple what answers we might receive.

Perhaps we might hear things like, “Oh, they are just made for each other”, or “they’re both in the music or movie industry”, or “Well, for now they can stand to be around each other for more

than five minutes so why don’t they get together!”

And if we were to look at most Hollywood marriages, they don’t tend to last and the reason often cited for divorce is “irreconcilable differences”.

What a cop out that is!

So maybe Hollywood is not the best place to find an answer to that question. How about the Bible? I wonder if we asked the Bible what makes a great couple what answers we might receive.

Perhaps we might hear things like two people who choose to put God at the centre of their lives.

Or a committed loving relationship that exists to love God and love others in every way possible.

Or maybe the combination of two people whose story fits into the bigger picture of God’s Big Story.

Gee whiz, what a lot to live up to!!!

Does that mean everything is going to run smoothly for the said couple and they won’t experience conflict, loss or suffering – or ever get things wrong? Well no!

Since the first couple in the Bible, Mr Adam and Mrs Eve Badfruit, chose what they wanted over what God had said, all individuals and couples experience conflict, loss and suffering. No-one is immune.

And on that cheery note, we're into a series we are calling couples in the Bible. And we're focusing our efforts in the Old Testament – those books that were written before Jesus Christ appeared in the world.

As you might know, it's easy for people to read the Old Testament and come away with the picture of God as somewhat of an old guy with a beard and a stick who enjoys judging people and is a somewhat distant God. And then you come to the New Testament and we meet Christ, and we come away with the picture of God as a caring shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep safely in the flock to go and pursue the one who is wandering.

However, if we take the Bible as one big story with certain themes running through it and how everything either leads towards Jesus or comes from him, then we come away with the big picture of the gospel, of who exactly God is through Christ, what He came to do, and how God always, always had a plan.

Imagine leaving your home and going to a foreign location where

the people, customs and language is different to what you are used to. You don't know what protocol is, you don't know how to say yes or no, you are a stranger in a foreign land.

That's the situation facing Abram and his wife Sarai, the couple we are focusing on today.

(SLIDE 1)

When you hear the names Abraham and Sarah, I wonder what springs to mind. Maybe God's call to Abram to become a great nation and have many descendants. Or God's promise to Abraham and Sarah to give them a son in their older years? Possibly Abraham and Sarah's faith (or struggle with faith somewhat) in God to provide? Or perhaps it's the struggles of a couple desperate more than anything for a son.

Maybe some of you here might not have heard of Abraham and Sarah, and that's okay. You'll know them a bit by the end of this message. Their story comprises quite a lot of the chapters in Genesis, so I thought rather than go through all of their story – because it's quite long in the Bible, about ten chapters! – Why not quickly summarise the story and then we can talk about how this couple's life and story fits into God's big story.

So here we go:

(SLIDE 2)

Once there was a man named Abram. One day the Lord came to talk to Abram, and Abram asked Him, "Who will have all my things when I die".

God promised Abram and his wife Sarai that one day they would be parents, even though they were old and had no children.

God wasn't sure that Abram understood. So that night He took him outside, and said, "Do you see all the stars that are in the sky"? When Abram looked up, the whole night sky was full of stars, so many in fact that he would never be able to count them. Then God said, "That is how many children you will have".

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Quite a few years later when Abram was ninety-nine years old (older than even your grandparents) the Lord decided to change Abram's name to Abraham, which means "father of many." He also changed Sarai's name to Sarah (meaning "a mother of nations").

God told them again that they would be parents and that they would have a boy. This time Abraham laughed so hard he fell on his face! It was hard to believe that he and Sarah would have a child in their old age.

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One day three visitors came to Abraham's house. He hurried to meet them. "May I get you something to eat and drink?" Abraham asked. "Please come in and join us, and have a rest on the couch."

The visitors agreed, so Abraham brought them some fresh bread, milk, and hamburgers.

While the visitors were eating, they asked Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?" Abraham thought this was a little strange, but he replied, "She's in the other room".

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Then one of the men spoke and said, "I will come back to see you at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening behind the living room door. She started to laugh, but covered her mouth and laughed to herself because she didn't want to be heard. Then she said to herself, "How can I have a child, I'm almost one hundred years old?"

Later when the visitors had left, Abraham and Sarah realised that the man who had told them this was indeed God.

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A year later Sarah did have a son. She and Abraham named him Isaac, which means "he laughs."

They were very excited, and remembered to thank God for Isaac.

As the youth might say at the end of that, "Cool story bro!" And it is a cool story, but let's now dig a bit deeper into it and see what it tells us about this crazy couple, but more importantly what it says about God and how Abraham and Sarah's story fits into God's Big Story.

(SLIDE 7)

First thing to note, God uses normal, everyday, broken people according to His plan. Abraham and Sarah were as human as you and I. It could be tempting to hold them up on a pedestal as one of the supreme couples in the Old Testament – or even the Bible! – and almost make an idol out of them. "I want to be like Abraham or Sarah, or I want my faith and relationship to be like theirs."

But they got things wrong. They wanted to speed up the process. They struggled with their faith. They pushed ahead. They doubted what God had said – similar to Adam and Eve. They were completely human.

(SLIDE 8)

Works in progress. I like that term and I think it describes all of us and our faith journey. We will never arrive until we meet Jesus face to face, but we can have assurance that God is working in us and through us according to His plan.

God knew that Abraham and Sarah were works in progress and He wanted to use them because of this. God realised that here was a man and woman that had made a commitment to follow him, a commitment to love each other, and a commitment to live out their faith. He also knew that they would lie (or tell half-truths) to other people due to fear of what could happen to them. He also knew that they would take things into their own hands and try "force" the process of getting a son. And He also knew that they would both laugh when promised a son in their old age.

And that makes Abraham and Sarah relatable for us today. I live with myself and know the times I get things wrong; when I want to speed up the process, when I struggle with my faith, and when I doubt God in my life and my relationships too.

When it comes to relationships, one thing I really craved growing up was being in a committed, exciting and loving relationship with someone. I had this deep desire from a young fella to be married by age 24. That was a big goal for me. Not sure why!

Throughout my teenage years I had one long committed relationship with a girl at my school. But as what happens with most young relationships, it eventually fell apart after and left me with plenty of hurt, doubt and confusion – about girls and about God.

After this, and not through lack of trying or wanting, I didn't meet anyone or experience a committed, exciting and loving relationship until February 2007.

I can still remember the day. It was my first day training at BTI to be a counsellor and I was sitting in the lecture room when this really attractive young woman walked in. There was a seat next to me and I was praying that she would come and sit next to me. She came up to the section I was sitting in and she sat down right in front of me. Well, that was close, I thought. Then within five seconds she turned around and introduced herself ... Hi, I'm Roxy. Hi, I'm Matt.

And that was that – within a year we were married (at age 24), after a year and a half of marriage we had our first son Noah. Then came Elijah, then Judah, then Asher ... Of course, that is the quick version of events and there has been a lot of stuff that has happened within the ten years, but my point is that my great desire was to be in a committed, exciting and loving relationship

by age 24 and that happened.

Now I won't kid you or myself and say that every time our desires work out the way we want them to. And some of you are likely sitting here with unmet desires, unanswered prayers, and unwanted circumstances in life. And I acknowledge you this morning.

(SLIDE 9)

My point is that God knows the desires of our hearts. He really does. Psalms 37:4 says: "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." That's a promise we can claim.

God knew what Abraham and Sarah desired most of all – a son. Someone to carry on the family line, to gain the inheritance, to pass on their legacy to. But God gave them so much more than this. He promised to Abraham to make his descendants as numerous as the stars. And Genesis chapter 15 verse 6 says: "Abram put his trust in the Lord, and because of this the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him."

(SLIDE 10)

What a statement to live by and have your life summarised by. Put your name at the start, put his or her trust in the Lord, and because of this the Lord was pleased with him or her and accepted him or her.

Abraham didn't always get it right, but his heart was in the right place. He put his trust in the Lord. Despite how his circumstances looked, his faith remained in the Lord. His personal saviour. And he believed and lived by the motto that God was with him and would provide.

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That's the second thing to note: God is there for His people and provides according to His plan. Both Abraham and Sarah had faith that God would be there for them and provide for them.

It sounds so simple and easy, but put yourself in their shoes. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he first heard the call from God to leave his home, land and country – to go to the home, land and country where God would bless him and make him into a great nation. Seventy-five years old! That's about the time people want to settle down, relax, play with the grandchildren and great grand-children if they have them, and enjoy the retirement they have earned and saved for.

Not start off on something new!

(SLIDE 12)

I imagine Abraham to be like Bilbo Baggins, the Hobbit off on an unexpected journey and adventure. Can you imagine the conversation with Sarah, "Hey hun, I know we're in our twilight years and you want to downsize and all that, but umm well God's

just told me to leave Haran and everything we know that is familiar with us, and well, trust Him for what happens next. He's also promised to make me – or us – into a great nation and bless our descendants. So, yeah, what do you reckon?"

Sarah was probably gobsmacked. Understandable. Not just because of leaving all familiarity. But she was barren and had given her husband no children so far. Was this some kind of trick God was playing on them? Could she really trust her husband to lead them and God to be there when they leave everything at their age?

Can I really trust God?

(SLIDE 13)

It seems like we ask that question a lot in our lives ...

Can I trust God in my finances? Can I trust Him with my family?

Can I trust Him in this health problem I am facing? Can I trust that He cares and will provide?

To Sarah's credit, she doesn't question her husband and submits to his path and vision, and heads with him for new land. It would be great to hear more of her thoughts about this and her husband – and later in God's big story we have the writing of the apostle Peter who wrote this of Sarah:

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“Long ago those women who worshiped God and put their hope in him made themselves beautiful by putting their husbands first. For example, Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him her master.” (1 Peter 3:5-6) Another way of putting this is Sarah answered her husband, “Yes, my lord.”

Today in our culture we would not think of asking a wife to call her husband “lord”, but in that day it was Sarah’s way of expressing her submissiveness. Strangely enough, faith and submission actually go together. Submission for a wife is basically faith that God is working through her husband to accomplish what is best for her. And that is the overarching story of Sarah’s life with Abraham.

God was working through Abraham to accomplish part of the bigger picture. God was slowly – but deliberately – raising up descendants to carry on Abraham’s family line and for his people to become God’s people, God’s family.

So, note one: God uses normal, everyday, broken people according to His plan. Note two: God is there for His people and provides according to His plan.

(SLIDE 15)

And note three: God comes through for His people in His time according to His plan. Abraham and Sarah saw God come through for them time and time again.

God looked out for Abraham and Sarah. He rescued them from calamity. He was patient with them when they doubted. He called them out on their lack of faith, but ultimately encouraged them. He appeared to them when they needed reassurance. He came through for them.

He gave them their promised son, Isaac – despite their efforts to come through for themselves. See, Sarah gave her maidservant Hagar to Abraham to conceive the chosen son – and Hagar gave Abraham a son, Ishmael. God promised to bless Ishmael and make him into a great nation too – but he was not the chosen one. He was not the one God promised to Abraham and Sarah.

Pause.

Why couldn’t they have just waited? Why did they have to take things into their own hands and force the process, so to speak?

(SLIDE 16)

Well, isn’t that the way we live? We don’t like waiting. Human beings are not good at waiting. Don’t believe me – just ask yourself, how much do you like waiting at a red light? Aren’t you just holding out for the green light? You might be like me, and even stare at the other lights so you know that when they turn from green to orange, you can get ready to go and leave the driver in the car beside you in your dust!

Or what about when you're at the supermarket – What line do you look for at the checkout? The one with the least amount of people, the one with no 'slow coaches', or the one that is full with three to four people in the line? My guess is, like me, you look for the shortest line. Why? Because we don't like to wait.

Or how about when you go to the doctors and you have a test – What's the first thing you usually ask? How long do I have to wait for the result??

We don't like waiting. We like hurrying. We are a fast-paced, instagram, selfie-driven, Facebook posting culture. We want things now and we want things our way.

We're not so different from Abraham and Sarah. Or they're not so different from us ... Too often we time-conscious earthlings resent God's long delays and take matters into our own hands, usually to our great distress. If we could learn to keep trusting Him when our situation looks the bleakest, perhaps we would save ourselves much grief.

(SLIDE 17)

The good news is that God knows this about us, and he knew it about them, and He will carry on his plan regardless, coming through for us in His time. **He is faithful even when we are not.** His timing is perfect even when we try speed up the process.

He will come through, even when we stuff up.

God had Isaac lined up for Abraham and Sarah long before they even dreamed of having kids. Isaac was the promised child. Isaac was going to be the one on whom God built the nation of Israel. Isaac himself had a son called Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. Israel became the people of God. Israel became the nation whom God promised to Abraham way back when he was seventy-five years old, minding his own business, and looking to enjoy the quiet life.

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Putting this story into the bigger story, God has a plan. He's always had a plan! God knew that his people, his son Israel, would not be able to live up to his standards. He knew that Israel would wander and worship other gods; He knew that Israel would stop believing in the one true God and instead start chasing after other things of the world; He knew that Israel could not save itself – despite its best efforts. He knows that we cannot save ourselves – despite our best efforts.

So God had the plan in mind that He would need to do something so incredibly drastic, so unbelievably permanent and so ultimately loving. He would send his own Son, Jesus. His only child. The true promised child from Abraham's family. And Jesus would stand in the gap for us.

He would be the one who would make things right between us and the one true God. From the beginning of time when the first humans Adam and Eve first sinned and disobeyed God, He would redeem all wrongdoing and evil embarked upon and executed by the entire human race.

He would eradicate the problem of sin once and for all. He would make a way for people to be made right with God.

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But it would cost him. It cost him his life. Jesus, the promised Son, the true Israel, went to the cross because of His love for everyone. God realised the problem of sin was something that only He himself could destroy and bring new life through his death. He paid the price for all mankind. He declared, "It is finished!" No greater words have ever been uttered in the history of the human race. When Jesus rose again three days later he had defeated all sin, death and destruction.

And we are made right through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We have been justified by a holy God because of His supreme sacrifice. God loves us and has always had a plan.

(SLIDE 20)

So as we finish the message and the music team comes up to lead us again, just like our couple today Abraham and Sarah,

we can take comfort that:

God uses normal, everyday, broken people according to His plan.

God is there for His people and provides according to His plan.

And God comes through for His people in His time according to His plan.

And you were always part of his plan.

God made the promise to Abraham and Sarah to bless them with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

He didn't just promise them Isaac. He promised them a huge family, God's family.

So who are the promised descendants? It's you. You're the promised descendants. All of God's family through Christ – the true promised Child – are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

How amazing is that??? And how incredible is our God?