

MOTHERS,
LOVERS,
PRIESTS,
PROPHETS,
and KINGS

*What the Old Testament Tells Us
About God and Ourselves*

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the school year, when we first start the process of the rite of Christian initiation of adults, I ask the participants and catechists to make a map of their lives in whatever way makes sense to them and to put on that map the important moments of their lives, however they define them. Inevitably, in the course of telling the stories attached to these moments, we come to know a good deal about each other and we reveal far more than we might in an ordinary “getting to know you” conversation.

Recently on the map I drew, I found myself putting down the moment I learned to read as a turning point. I remember sitting in the green chair in our living room with anything I could get my hands on (including, at one point, a cereal box) and reading out loud. When my mother asked what I was doing, I looked up at her and said very seriously, “I am reading with expression,” a phrase I had, no doubt, heard in school.

It strikes me that reading with expression is a wonderful phrase for storytelling. “With expression” captures the wonder of reading that simultaneously manifests our emotions as we get caught up in the story and demonstrates the intent to squeeze out the characters and the situations so they inhabit our imaginations as living beings, teaching us about their world and ours and giving us another window through which we might see ourselves.

We can find the stories of our lives almost anywhere, even on a cereal box, but for Christians, one particular collection of stories helps to tell us who we are more than any other.

The Bible is our first library. In its pages we find people of virtue and vice, heroism and cowardice, holiness and sinfulness. The Bible tells about a God who is constant and surprising, judgmental and merciful. It is no secret that, for a Christian, the heart of the Bible resides in the gospels and the stories of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament.

One of my former students, a woman named Pattie, said that “the story of sacred Scripture turns on the life of one person, Jesus Christ.” In the gospel narrative, we learn of God incarnate and walking among us as Jesus. Jesus heals the sick and raises the dead and, when the time comes, gives his life for those he loves. In fact, we might augment Pattie’s comment by saying that the whole of Scripture turns on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

In his story, we also learn our story: The God of Jesus is our God as well. We learn that God is in a relationship with us and that that relationship is familial—we are God’s children.

John’s first epistle adds that we do not know yet what we will become, but we do know that we are called to love one another and to love God, even if it means letting go of everything. We are invited, even challenged, to be disciples of Jesus, who is God with us. And we are part of a community of faith based on the apostles’ witness and teaching.

It is also no secret that many Christians are far less familiar with the stories of the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures). Though we claim that the entire Bible reveals God to us and tells us the story of God’s relationship with God’s people, our knowledge of this other two-thirds of Scripture is limited to a few “fantastic tales,” like the creation stories of Genesis, the Exodus narrative (thank you, Cecil B. DeMille and Steven Spielberg), and David and Goliath.

We might even reach into our memories for the story of Samson, whose haircut meant his capture but whose strength returned at the last second. And we might recall Ezekiel, who saw a wheel, or Elijah, who was caught up into heaven in a whirlwind.

Among the stories of women, we might have heard about Ruth and possibly about Sarah, but few others stand out. As a whole, though, Christians tend to neglect the Hebrew Scriptures for many different reasons. In classrooms and gathering spaces in the archdiocese of Chicago, people tell me they do not like “that Old Testament God,” who has been portrayed to them as vindictive, judgmental, and arbitrary.

Still others find the language and the customs of the ancient Israelites confusing and inexplicable. A few more cite boredom as the reason for their neglect.

What few realize is that the God we meet in the Hebrew Scriptures is the God we meet in the Christian New Testament. The God of love and compassion and the God of war are the same God. Judgment and punishment occur in both the Old and the New Testaments, as do mercy and forgiveness.

In those moments when Christians do study the Hebrew Bible, it is hard to let go and let the text reveal its meaning and illuminate our understanding of God and ourselves. We tend to consider the Hebrew text important only if it speaks about Jesus, and so we read Jesus back into every text.

In truth, we cannot know God very well when we encounter him in the New Testament person of Jesus if we have not spent considerable time with God as we meet him in the Old Testament.

At the same time, the stories of Scripture, whether Old or New Testament, are stories about us as well. Every human strength and flaw has a place in these stories. Heroes, villains, people striving to lead faithful lives, and those simply caught up in the moment are on display as living word.

As they meet God and one another, so do we. Each of them adds a little more to the understanding of who we are and *whose we are* as we make our way in this world. Not only that, but the relationship between God and the world is told bit by bit in these stories.

Where else can we find mothers, lovers, judges, priests, and countless other characters who demonstrate so vividly the human struggle

with faith and life? In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, they reveal, surprise, and engage us, moving us deeper and deeper into reflection on our life in God. Such stories are the expressions of our lives and of God's life with us, designed to convey in mere words what we have spent lifetimes trying to understand: that God loved the world.

The stories and meditations in this book are taken from the Hebrew Scriptures. Some will be familiar, some will be strange. All of them will bring us face to face with God in some way. In the course of storytelling, we will look at the backstory or context of the piece because context can illuminate and clarify an experience as well as give us a point of departure for our own stories.

We will also reflect on the stories themselves, stories of human experience that reveal so much about the One who made us, and which help us make sense of our experience with Jesus.

The oral tradition from which these stories come practically begs us to read them out loud first, and so I invite you to do that with as much expression as possible. Hearing the stories out loud often brings out words and meanings that remain hidden when we read silently, because our attention is focused on the text rather than on the appointment we have to keep later. We hear differently when we read out loud than when we read silently. We hear our words express what we feel about the story and, in that way, hear the stories as an expression of ourselves.

Following each story is a meditation for personal reflection and some questions for group sharing. All of them are designed to move us more deeply into our experiences with God. A final prayer invites the presence of God a little more intentionally and nudges us all a little closer to the divine.

MOTHERS

There are mothers who have given physical birth to their children and mothers (whether female or male) who have helped bring our souls and characters to birth by their compassion and attentiveness. Sometimes, these are the same people.

Many of us have been very fortunate to have more than one mothering influence in our lives, and they have taught us well about birth and death and everything in between. My mother taught me about making people welcome and about doing the best you can even if it does not happen to be what you want to do at the time.

Among the many people who “mothered” me in times of joy and grief and helped me grow are a Sister of Mercy and her wise counsel in hard times, a priest whose care for me in the period after the death of my parents was a gift from God, and my own sister whose humor left me breathless with laughter and restored my sense of perspective.

In these stories, we will meet four women—three mothers and a would-be mother—who greet the task of raising children who are not always their own with laughter, fear, courage, and forcefulness, and are shaped by that into women who come to know love in all its complexity.

They are a reminder to all of us that caring for another human being demands that we grow in our ability to love deeply, to let go, to ask for what we need, and to give whatever we can. We take our cue from God, who has done all of these things for us.

THE WOMAN WHO LAUGHED AT GOD

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife, Sarah, shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

The Backstory

We meet Sarah and Abraham in the book of Genesis, part of the Pentateuch or the first five books of the Bible. In these books, some of the great acts of God take place—Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, including the parting of the Red Sea. In fact, Jack Miles, in his biography of God, gives the Pentateuch the overarching theme of “God Acts.” Included in those great acts is a promise given to a man and woman who had no reason to believe they were even noticed by God at all.

When we first meet Sarah (shortly before this story) we are gradually told three things about her: she is beautiful, she does not have children, and she isn’t getting any younger.

For the ancient Israelites, children were the promise for the future. Not to have children was considered a tragedy.

Meanwhile, Sarah’s husband, Abraham, had followed a God he didn’t know from Ur to Canaan and had been given a promise of land, descendants, and blessing, not once, but twice. In an effort to please her husband and make God’s promises come true, Sarah convinces him to have a child with her servant.

The second time Abraham hears the promise (Chapter 17), we are told that he is nearly a hundred, and Sarah is ninety years old. Abraham calculates the odds and figures that God must mean his son, Ishmael, borne of Hagar. It really didn’t seem possible that Sarah and he could have a child.

At the same time, Sarah and Abraham live in the Middle East where the great tradition of hospitality requires that you greet strangers and make them welcome guests. Such strangers might simply be people looking for a place of shelter, or they might be angels bringing a blessing.

The practice is continued, not only in the Middle East, but in places like my mother’s house where there was always enough for one more and always an extra gift at Christmas in case we met someone who needed a place to stay and a family with whom to celebrate.

In this story, Abraham does everything that is required, from greeting the strangers to running to the kitchen to instruct Sarah to running to the barn to instruct the servants in order to ensure that a wonderful feast is prepared for the strangers. Then he sits, expectantly it seems, for the word of thanks or blessing or honor that will surely come to him as head of the house. He leans forward eagerly as they open their mouths to speak.

And he is immediately surprised when the word that comes from the stranger's mouth is neither thanks nor a blessing, but a question: "Where is Sarah, your wife?" Sarah was where she always seemed to be, in the tent, at the table, and behind the scenes.

But the promise, the blessing, the gift of this stranger was hers: “I will return about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.” For the first time in this family drama, Abraham seems to realize that God’s covenant and promise is not only about him. Up until this point, the promise of God came to him, and Sarah remained strangely silent through most of it. Now the focus is on Sarah, who remains listening carefully at the door of the tent.

While Abraham's reaction to the promise was surprise and a misunderstanding, Sarah bursts forth in recognition of the ludicrous. She laughs and draws the Lord's attention. She thinks about the impossibility of it all, knowing that time and age are often cruel with human bodies and human desires. And she and Abraham had not been able to have a child before this, no matter how hard they tried. Some things, she thought, are just not going to happen.

What Does This Story Tell Us?

Sarah thought what God promised was impossible, but she is hardly the only person to have thought so. Her reasons are rational: She and Abraham are too old to have children, and nothing they had done to that point had helped.

Besides, she knew Abraham had been given this promise already and they had done their best to take care of it. What could the promise have to do with her now? We might all have a tendency to respond with very rational reasons when God calls to us or reveals a plan that seems impossible.

Some of us might even indulge in a little sarcasm: “Oh really?” But when we try to laugh God off and dismiss what we think God might be after, God’s reaction is often uncomfortable in its simplicity. “Why did you laugh?” And we are caught. If we say we didn’t laugh, God counters with, “Yes, you did,” and waits patiently for the answer. God’s response to Sarah makes us think a little bit.

The story of Sarah teaches us that God is undeterred by our disbelief or our sarcasm. Nor is God persuaded when we, for whatever reason, think that we cannot possibly be the person that God has in mind to get the job done.

For her whole life, Sarah thought that Abraham was the center of God’s attention. So it seemed unusual that the stranger who had come to their door would ask about her and promise that she would have a son.

But she quickly found out that even those who live behind the scenes and out of the spotlight and who quietly go about their day-to-day lives can be the recipients of God’s grace and attention just as much as those who live at the center.

God touches each one of us, whether or not we have done something that others would consider noteworthy.

What had Sarah done but stand with Abraham as he set off for unknown places and try to give him a son even if it could not be hers, and then prepare a feast for her husband to serve to strangers?

And confronted at last by God, listening to what he had in store for her, she did what many of us would have done. She laughed at the absolute surprise and absurdity of it all, especially when she realized what God wanted even after that. It was something that Jeremiah and Mary and Peter and countless others in the Old and New Testaments knew something about.

Neither Sarah nor we are the first people to think that what God wants is impossible. But impossible is, in some ways, what gets God up in the morning. What we often read in Scripture is God's eternal laughter and the question: "What impossible surprise can I spring on someone today?"

In story after story in the Old Testament, we read about God, who is unpredictable and unable to be captured in a single image. And finally, the Scriptures tell us about God's ultimate surprise: that somebody who died on a cross could be the savior of the world.

As a parenthetical note: In the Church's *Lectionary*, this story of Sarah and Abraham is paired with another story about God's bounty. Martha, having learned very well the lessons of her ancestor, Sarah, stood serving in the kitchen while her sister, Mary, sat listening at Jesus' feet. "Perhaps," Martha thought, "God's blessing will come to me in the kitchen as it did for Sarah. And if Mary wants a portion of the blessing, she should come and serve as I do."

Of course, Jesus surprises Martha as much as God surprised Abraham. Every one of us has a little of Abraham and Martha in us. And just when we think we have things figured out, along come Sarah and Mary to confound expectations and let us know that God's blessing and promise come to those whom God wills, wherever they may be.

Meditation for Groups or Individuals

Sarah, like so many women and men both then and now, defines what's possible for herself by looking at age and her experiences (or lack of them) in her life. If we look at her whole story in Genesis, we will find that the narrator does the same and adds comments about her looks and whether she was a good wife to her husband.

We rarely hear her voice or her thoughts as she participates in the promise of God to give land, blessing, and descendants to Abraham. We do know that she felt keenly her inability to have children

and desired to help her husband (and God) fulfill the covenant. She was, perhaps, resigned to the reality that she was not going to have a family of her own.

Did she reach a point where she simply decided to get on with her life whether she had children or not? Did she accept what seemed to be her destiny and stop worrying about it? We will never know that for sure, but her reaction to God's promise—made directly to her in her senior years—suggests as much.

So much of Sarah's story and reaction to God's promise touches us at our hearts. Female or male, we often define ourselves (or are defined by others) by pointing to what we can do or how old (or young) we are.

And sometimes we depend on the approval of others for our worth and rely on their perceptions to tell us who we are.

Then, just when we think we have figured it out, someone or something comes along that confounds our expectations and does the impossible.

Inevitably, that stranger is an instrument of God who shows us a capacity for life in us that we did not know existed.

Read the story of Sarah again and put yourself in her place. Think about or discuss the following questions:

In what ways do you feel you are like Sarah? In what ways are you different?

Has there ever been a time when you have decided that something was impossible for you, for whatever reason, and then been surprised that it happened?

Have there been moments in your life when someone, unexpected or unexpectedly, has shown you how much you are loved?

How would you describe the feelings around that moment?

Sometimes we are confronted with decisions to make about where we are going and with whom we are going to spend our time.

When we look back, those decisions often mark turning points in our lives that shape forever the people we become. Have you ever had the urge to laugh when you look back at the choices you made? Is there any point where you laugh at God now and wonder what God could possibly want from you? What would your response be if God asked you, "Why did you laugh?"

Are you at a point of being able to let go of the need to control everything in your life and let God lead you to wherever you need to be led?

The Prayer of

THE WOMAN WHO LAUGHED AT GOD

My Dear God,

When I was young, you surprised me with the love of my life
and then told us we had to move to find another home.

When I was more than a few years married
you surprised me with an inability to have children
and strengthened our love for each other.

When I was old, you surprised me with the promise
of another life

and gently scolded when I laughed at all your surprises.

Keep surprising me, Lord,

for your surprise and my laughter keep me young
and full of life and full of love

and full of the knowledge in my deep heart
that, impossible as it might seem,

where you are is home for me.

Amen.

What is your prayer to God about the surprises in your life?