

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

September 14, 2025

The Story Behind the Story

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 14, 2025

The opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan* attempts to recreate the landing on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France on what is now known as D-Day in World War II.

On that day, over 150,000 troops completed the largest seaborne invasion in history. That opening scene took over 1,500 actors and extras twenty-five days to film, while consuming 20% of the movie's overall budget. They attempted to capture the horror of war.

Some veterans of World War II describe the combat scene as the most realistic portrayal of their own experiences. Critics claim that it earned Steven Spielberg an Oscar that year.

But the scene that I don't know if I can ever watch again from that movie occurs a world away.

A black car drives the one-lane road through an Iowa field. As it approaches the simple, white farmhouse, a woman watches through the windows. She wears an almost *standard issue* dress and apron from the 1940s.

The car stops. As the woman opens the door and walks onto the porch, a uniformed Army officer exits the car first and then a chaplain. Before they reach the front steps and utter a word, she falls to her knees.

That scene is the story behind this story of the movie.

She knows a son, or one of her four sons have died. The simplicity of that wordless encounter captures the horror of war and the drive to preserve humanity.

It is the story behind the story.

When I began studying the Old Testament with an esteemed rabbinic scholar, Michael Fishbane, he drilled into us, over and over, you need to learn the stories and then get behind the stories.

Get behind the story.

This slight man, with thick grey beard, and dark suit, practically danced on the lecture stand, to show us how we had to get behind the story. It's taken me years to unpack what that means, and I wonder if I will ever do justice to his demand.

Stories from the Old Testament spark our curiosity with odd facts. They include enough detail for us to taste the dust, imagine the etched lines surrounding the eyes of a patriarch, marvel at the customs, or feel the grief of a long-awaited but never realized dream.

These are stories of people like you and me. When we get behind the stories we discern enduring gifts from God of *blessing, descendants, and our responsibility for this inheritance.*

Today's story invokes all three.

A bit of context. God speaks to Abraham and tells him to leave his home and extended clan, and go to another country. God promises "I will bless you and you will be a blessing." God promises "descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky."

Abraham stands as a pillar of faith among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – the descendants – because he trusts God’s promises even when they seem far-fetched.

Abraham and his wife, Sarah, are both very old and childless. But Abraham trusts and thus begins an adventure and a dynasty. As time ticks by, Sarah’s impatience rots inside. She forces Abraham to take Hagar, a woman she’d enslaved, and conceive a son whom she attempts to claim.

Through that child, Ishmael, God makes good on the promise to Abraham to produce a legacy. Islam traces its foundation to Ishmael and Abraham.

But, what about Sarah’s grief of childlessness that grows each year?

Dear God, we can get lost in these old stories and push them away as ancient relics. Settle us in. Silence our skepticism. Startle us with a truth as clear now as then. Amen.

Genesis 18:1-15

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. Abraham 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, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid.

The Lord said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

We get behind this story by first considering the bare facts.

Despite the uncertainty of three strangers, Abraham offers the most honored virtue of that time: hospitality. In a nomadic culture, hospitality was more than a gracious welcome. Since the harsh conditions could take human life in a matter of days or even hours, hospitality sustained life.

Today, we'd say Abraham risked himself and family by letting nomads into his home. Yet, his willingness to open himself to tend another human remains an ideal celebrated throughout our faith. “A little bread and water” turn into a feast of choice veal, curds and cakes.

Sarah is just the opposite. She hides.

Was she angry at being uprooted by Abraham when God promised him a blessing, but not her? Did she feel neglected while God showers her husband with a legacy? Had her righteous indignation blinded her from seeing the divine presence among these strangers?

So when Sarah hears God promise her a son, she laughs. Cynical, skeptical, or shame—Sarah shows just how vulnerable she feels. Her laugh was a release valve for her soul.

When another person traipses into our deepest longings, we may laugh as easily as cry. This tender spot is the purview of comedians, who name our embarrassments and fears, as they

dive into what we are too polite to admit or think too risky to speak about. Comedians linger there, letting us laugh at ourselves at what we know is true.

But, God is not looking to mock Sarah.

God steps into that hurting place to let her know—nothing is beyond God.

In that place of being vulnerable, God begins the redemptive work for her and for their collective future. God needs her.

God asks; “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

There are many people whose lives are shadowed, if not destroyed, by believing God is always up there looking down on them—constantly judging, disapproving, doling out punishment.

Oh, how we let others corrupt the goodness of faith and use it as a weapon.

For these damaged souls, fear and hiding might be for self-protection. On the other hand, for those who are used to a benign *God-in-the-background* whose dominion is outside of the grit of life, this idea of God might come as a relief.

It means God is in the thick and thin of our trials and knows us.

That’s the God who appears to Sarah—God was intimate—literally in her face—and naming her shame, her stuck-ness, and her fear. And God names her greatest dream. When

Sarah denies her laughter, God would not let it slide; “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

A pregnancy occurs and Isaac is born, just as promised.

“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” is the question that invites us behind the story.

If we say “yes, somethings are” then we doubt that God is God, and is not able to do the remarkable. If we think “yes,” we yield to reliable hopelessness and stay stuck into whatever pit we’ve fallen.

If we answer “no, I trust nothing is beyond God” then we admit our humanity and God’s sovereignty. We set aside our entrenched way of life. We admit God’s infinite possibility.¹

Rather than tell a story of people languishing in the desert of despair, our ancient authors describe the possibility through Sarah. She is the first of a long-line of women who had no ability to bear a child and yet conceive.

When the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, rather than chronicle an uprising, our story of faith tells of brave midwives sparing Moses’ life and Pharaoh’s daughter sheltering it. Ancient authors create the possibility of unlikely collaboration among those most desperate for humanity to flourish so that we may imagine working across enemy lines and our future generations will no longer be sacrificed.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation Series*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1988), p. 159.

While the Israelites flounder in the promised land, the rise of the Davidic dynasty begins again in the story of a barren woman whose faith in God becomes the site for blessing.

All these stories symbolize God's desire to work through unlikely humans for life to flourish.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

In the Gospel of Luke, despite her advanced age, Elizabeth conceives of John the Baptist, who makes a way for our savior. Was humanity to be written off to totalitarian rule and the greed of old men? No.

God had faith in Mary. She bears our savior who topples our limited imaginations about the power of love to overcome the threat of wanton violence. No one expects an itinerant Jew from the garbage heap of Nazareth to change human history.

In ordinary lives, God appears, transforming us from barren to fertile, from narrow to expansive lives, and on the third day of Jesus' death, God alters an irreparable darkness to raise new life.

The stories lure us to get behind them, so we wrestle to understand God's claim on our lives. God is not an abstract quality. An abstract quality does not get involved in our messy lives. Nor can an abstract quality dry our tears or forgive us.

Each story is about us as much as some ancient character. If we think we are like Sarah, so guilty of denying the humanity of Hagar and unworthy of God's promise, think again. If we see ourselves in Sarah, so far at the end of our lives and unable

to exert any influence on the future, we need to think again. Sarah had to let go of all that regret and the shame from a lifetime of loss.

Maybe Sarah laughs at the unbearable weight of God's faith in her.

What message could arrive at our doorstep that invokes our participation to make us want to hide? Make us laugh at doing the impossible?

The weekly mass shooting of children, and the resulting *dialogue* in our nation that led to *another* assassination may make us want to run and hide. But hiding will not make us safe nor absolve us from the need to act. We've hidden behind the word "impossible" since Columbine and Sandy Hook while each year thousands of our children are sacrificed.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

God needs each of us to say "no more" when politicians claim it's the other party's fault, or they incite fear of the stranger, or belittle us into thinking that we are just not smart enough or strong enough to change, or that we are beyond change.

That grieving mother who'd fallen on the porch in Iowa knew it depended upon her to change the future. God had faith in her. God had faith in Sarah.

God puts faith in each of us. Old and young. Red and Blue. Angry and grieving to do what seems impossible so that this generation and our future generations are not sacrificed.

Let me close with portions of a prayer/poem posted this week in the aftermath of yet another school shooting and assassination of a public leader.

I can't make the
world be peaceful
I can't prevent children
from having to hide behind desks
I can't deflect a sniper's bullet
from turning a wife into a widow
I can't convince politicians
to quit playing truth or dare
I can't do any of that
the only thing I can do
is love the next person I encounter
without any conditions or strings
I can't force peace
on the world
but I can become a force
of peace in the world
because
sometimes all it takes
is a single lit candle
in the darkness
to start a movement
oh, Spirit,
let me be a candle
of comfort in this world
let me burn with peace

~ john roedel



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