

Trash and Treasure

This morning we move quickly from the wonders of creation to life in that creation. Adam and Eve have left the garden behind. Their sons Cain and Abel have brought us the first round of extreme sibling rivalry. Noah has built his ark, and God has been hard at work re-creating the world again. The Tower of Babel has come and gone, and we now meet a man named Abraham, a descendent of Noah, several generations removed. We're first given his name at the end of chapter 11, along with the name of his wife. The genealogy in chapter 11 is similar to other long lists of unfamiliar names we come across (or skip over) in the bible. It's a bunch of names without descriptions or backstories...except for Sarah. The writer of this part of Genesis pauses in the middle of this lengthy description of Abraham's family tree to tell us one very important bit of news: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child."¹ In chapter 12, God calls Abraham to pack up his family and go to the land that God promises to show him...at some point...TBD...to be determined—or disclosed—later. God doesn't tell Abraham (or Abram as he's called at first) where he is called to go. God simply tells Abraham to go, that God plans to make him the father of a great nation, and Abraham goes—along with his barren wife with no known destination in sight. [Read Genesis 18: 1-15; 21:1-7]

The website oldest.org has all sorts of information I never knew I needed, including the oldest woman to finish a marathon (Harriette Thompson, at the age of 94) and the oldest medical student (Atomic Leow, age 66). The web site is not as up to date as one would hope because it does not include Mangayamma Yaramati who gave birth to twins in India in 2019 at the age of 74 (or 73, depending on

¹ Genesis 11: 30, New Revised Standard Version, updated edition (NRSVue)

who you ask).² The site does not include Sarah either, of course, who would be the runaway winner of the title after giving birth to Isaac in her 90s, so the story goes.

We are not all that surprised when Sarah laughs at the stranger's promise about that child. In fact we laugh, too, and even say, "Wowza!" as eloquently articulated by someone at bible study on Wednesday. We tend to laugh and even roll our eyes at the absurdity of these more-than-late-in-life birth stories, and yet there is deep sorrow and anguish behind them. Ms. Yaramati has said that she pursued *in vitro* fertilization out of guilt: "'People looked at me with accusing eyes as if I had committed a sin,' she said to the *Times of India*."³ Sarah could relate, I'm guessing, as could so many who have longed for a child for any number of reasons. The struggle with infertility has a long and painful history, one that continues today. Even though we claim to be more sensitive and more enlightened, it is not unusual for those who long to be parents to endure well-meaning but stinging comments about God's will, being patient, eating this, or avoiding that. And, too often, like Ms. Yaramati, the longing ones begin to think they have done something wrong to still be without a child, something to offend God, something that keeps them from the one thing they desire most in their heart of hearts. Like Sarah, the barrenness comes to define them. And occasionally, not having a child relegates them to the fringe of the community, where they are pitied and whispered about, regarded—in Sarah's case at least—as a has-been, worthless in society's eyes, something to be ignored or tossed aside. Some translations have Sarah describe herself simply as old, but others tell us she sees herself as withered. One recent translation uses the word *shriveled*.⁴ To be shriveled is to be not simply old, but drained of life and liveliness, to be worn out, worn down, of little to no use to anyone.

² Joshua Bote, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/parenting/2019/09/06/oldest-woman-to-ever-give-birth-has-twins-at-74-years-old/2231598001/>

³ Bote

⁴ Robert Alter, translator, *The Hebrew Bible*, vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2019) 58.

Nelson Molina worked for the New York City Sanitation Department for 34 years. Over the course of three decades, Nelson collected tens of thousands of objects that New Yorkers had thrown away. In a short documentary entitled, *Treasures in the Trash*—which is also the name of his collection—we watch as Molina lights up at the discovery of a light blue vase in a garbage bag on the sidewalk, and as he lovingly dusts and cleans the vase and adds it to his still-growing collection. Through the eyes of the filmmaker, we are invited to scan floor-to-ceiling shelves in an unused New York garage. On these shelves and in plastic storage containers Molina shows us Inspector Gadget toys from McDonald’s, a book signed by Lena Horne, and an R2D2 phone, just to name a few. His collection includes trophies, photos, silverware, and even a somewhat unsettling stuffed dog he named Cigarettes. Molina says his determination to find treasures in the trash began in childhood when he would salvage broken toys and fix them up so that his siblings would have gifts under the tree at Christmas. He says he was taught never to “throw anything out if it can be used, or given another life.”⁵ Even after retiring, Molina carefully cultivates his collection, adding new treasures when he comes across them. He says his job was the best job in the world, and the gigantic grin on his face shows that he believes it to be true in his very core. He loves finding treasures in what the world throws away, in giving a bit of TLC and new life to things no one else sees a reason to keep, let alone treasure. His dream is to raise funds to create a more permanent home for his treasures, so that the larger world can see these cast-offs as he does.

I wonder if this might be how God sees Sarah. On occasion I have thought that God is just showing off by enabling a ninety year old to have a child. Sarah and Abraham have struggled to believe that Sarah will be the mother of nations. They have even attempted an end run, forcing an enslaved woman named Hagar to bear a child as Sarah’s surrogate instead. Maybe God is giving Abraham and Sarah one more chance to buy into God’s faithfulness in keeping promises. But I wonder if it isn’t

⁵ <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2019/09/treasures-in-the-trash/>

something more, if this story is about more than childbirth and rocking chairs being used for something other than savoring the golden years. What if it is about God's ability to see treasure when we see trash? What if it's about God's seeing new life when all we can see is a shriveled old soul?

We preach new life, we proclaim resurrection, but we, too, can be guilty of writing people off as irrelevant or unworthy. When we insist that children are our future and that our older members are our history, we are tempted to forget that together we are God's present. It is easy to long for the glory days gone by; it is tempting to wish away the hard days and the struggles ahead for the day when the bills are all paid, when the retirement is official, when the work is done, but I wonder what we risk missing in front of us right now. I know more than a few of us can see ourselves in Sarah in her withered disappointment. We too—regardless of age or circumstance—likely know what it is to feel shriveled and skeptical, to feel as if life and opportunities have left us behind. We know what it is to scoff at a promise that sounds too good to be true, and if you don't, I guarantee you know and love someone who does. And yet, we are invited to see ourselves and others in this story, not only with Sarah in her struggles but also with Sarah when she laughs at the God who finds treasure in her trash, the God who insists that this one whose name means princess is bound not for the trash heap of history but for the blessing of the nations.

We have a trash problem. There is more trash than we can handle, and recycling grows more frustrating by the day, but the trash problem is bigger than what we can or cannot wheel out to the curb or what we can and cannot use for compost. Too many of us, too many of our siblings see themselves or others as shriveled, useless, washed up, sketchy, washed out, unworthy of love, and unable to be saved, but in God's eyes no one is trash. No one is intended for the trash heap. No one.

To be clear, God does not intend for Sarah to do what she has always done or be defined by who she has been in the past. God has something new in store for her and for the community through her.

God wants more for Sarah and for us than simply to save us from the landfill and tuck us safely on a shelf in a hidden garage. God is not concerned with preserving us as we have been. God is determined to do a *new* thing. Maybe this new thing is downright laughable in the eyes of the larger world. Maybe this new turn will make us laugh out loud, too. I am not suggesting that the folks from Taylor Glen and Morningside start a registry at Target for diapers and Pack & Plays, but I do think God sees possibilities even now in every one of us, young and old, bold and timid alike. God sees us as a part of the story and wants us to see ourselves as part of God's story, too.

It took Sarah a bit to trust that she had a part to play, a significant part, in fact, so it may take us a bit, too. However long it takes, it is crucial that we begin to understand that we are not simply passive readers of an ancient story. We are not bystanders. It is our time, our turn to take our place in God's work of blessing the world. It is more than a matter of old dogs' learning new tricks; it is a matter of answering the call from the Ancient of Days who is always bent on bringing new life out of dead ends and determined to include us in this life-bringing work. This new life will stretch us to try something we have not done before, just as it does with Sarah. It will challenge us to see the world and ourselves in a different way, to see each other and our siblings the world over in a different light. The God of Abraham and Sarah is still determined to bless the world not apart from the people of God but through them, through us, all of us, shriveled, sketchy, skeptical, or scared as we may be. And when the new life comes, we will laugh, and God will laugh with us, because by the grace of God, we will finally come to understand that nothing is too wonderful for God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.