

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Faith. Family. Fusion.

The Home Team

(Genesis 11-23)

Introduction: For better or for worst...

And you think you've got problems.

Her husband has bitten off the head of a live bat and of a live dove, passed out on a freeway median, and urinated in front of the Alamo. He spent years strung out on drugs and alcohol, and once set fire to their home.

And she's been no pushover. She tried to run him over with a car, smashed his records with a hammer and took out a restraining order against him (a smart move, it would seem).

After all this, Sharon and Ozzie (The Prince of Darkness) Osbourne have remained married to this day, twenty eight years after saying, "I do."¹ And from all reports, they are, today, happily married.

So - Happy Valentine's Day!

When we marry, we promise to stay with each other "till death does us part" and to love our spouse come richer or poorer, sickness or health, better or worse, or, as in the case of the Osbournes, worst.

Today, if you are married, you may not find yourself in as challenging a relationship as Ozzy and Sharon. But you may find it encouraging to know that if your marriage is less than an A+, you're not alone.

¹ From the Wall Street Journal, Tuesday, February 9, 2010. Elizabeth Bernstein.

The truth is, there are a lot of less-than-sterling A+ marriages out there - AND in here.

Fortunately for us, the Bible offers more than just "misery loves company" encouragement. The Bible offers real help to any husband/wife team that hopes for a brighter future together.

This morning, in our on-going goal to fuse "Faith" and "Family" we are going to consider the marriage relationship. Through a fluke of timing this message lands on Valentine's Day, a national celebration of romance and love.²

And I truly do hope that many marital fires are kindled (or re-kindled) this morning as we consider some of what the Bible has to say about the most important part of the "home team" there is - the husband and the wife.

I considered all kinds of ways to attack this topic, various passages to explore and themes to develop. It's hard to avoid the temptation to want to say everything in one message.

But in the end, I remembered that there's nothing so helpful as a story. So I have decided to tell you the story of one of the more famous marriages in the Bible. This morning our role models - for better and for worse - are the Old Testament team, Abraham and Sarah!

To find the story of Abraham and Sarah, just turn to the first book in the Bible - Genesis.

Marriage: A Journey TOGETHER (Genesis 11-12; Genesis 1-2)

From Ur to Canaan

God narrows His focus

Prior to Genesis 11, the events recorded in the Bible are all the big, cosmic stuff: Creation, the Fall, the Flood of Noah, the Tower of Babel.

² Really, I didn't plan it this way - Guillermo thought about it, but I didn't; those of you who know my penchant for minimizing holidays of all sorts will not be surprised by this oversight.

In the latter part of Genesis 11, though, the focus narrows to one man: Abraham (or, as he was known at the beginning of the story, Abram).

Abraham and his world

Abraham lived about four thousand years ago. His family had settled in what is currently Iraq. His hometown was a city named “Ur” in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.³ Ur was the hustling, bustling capitol city of the ancient Sumerian Empire and was located about one hundred and fifty miles north of the Persian Gulf.

In Mesopotamia there was abundant food and there were rich natural resources. Life was normal, routine, average - when Abraham heard the call of God.

God’s call

**[Genesis 12:1] Now the Lord said to Abram,
“Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you;**

It was while he was just minding his own business in Ur that God spoke to Abraham.⁴ He was told to leave everything familiar and head for the unfamiliar.

Why leave? Why was it so important that Abram needed to leave Ur?⁵

³ Mesopotamia means “between the rivers.”

⁴ First, Abram received the blessing and the commission recorded here in Genesis 12 while still living in Ur. Then, he told his father what God had told him and Terah led the way (Genesis 11:31 says that “**Terah took Abram...**”) to travel toward Canaan, making the journey a family affair. Then, for whatever reason, Abram joined his father for some period of time in Haran, where he stayed until his father died (out of respect? because of slowness to be faithful to God’s command?) At that point, either God re-iterated the covenant to Abram, or Abram remembered it again. This is when he and Sarah packed up from Haran, and continued traveling on toward Canaan.

⁵ There are all kinds of guesses. Some think that that God forced a physical move to remove Abram from old friends and familiar situations that might hinder him

Since we’re not told why, we can’t know for sure. But I think that the requirement to leave was primarily to force a step of FAITH from Abraham.

John Calvin paraphrases this way: *I command you to go forth with closed eyes...* I like that. No longer walk by sight, but by faith.

He was to leave everything familiar behind - Sumerian culture, familiar foods, language, customs, favorite spots in Ur, his extended family, everything - and go “**to the land which I will show you**”.

He left everything behind - except Sarah.

Abraham departs - with Sarah

When he left Ur, he traveled with Sarah. They first made their way to Haran, a city north of Canaan and stayed there for a while, probably for several years.

Then, Abraham headed south to Canaan. And he went with Sarah. From the first time we meet Abraham forward, he was always with Sarah.

They were together in Ur. They were together for the one thousand mile journey from Ur to Haran and then for the shorter journey from Haran to Canaan. On all of Abraham’s sojourns in Canaan, he took Sarah.

This is remarkable. Abraham left good friends behind in Ur, but he took Sarah. He left his family in Haran, but he took Sarah. What is it about marriage that forges such a bond? Well, it is in the nature of marriage. God designed it that way from the beginning - and I do mean the very beginning.

From Alone to Lonely to One-Flesh

Eden - an (almost) perfect environment

In the Garden of Eden, the Lord God placed the man, Adam, in a perfect environment.

from full faithfulness to God. (But, in going to Canaan, he would have every conceivable temptation to immorality and idolatry placed before him.)

There was no lack of anything necessary. There was an abundance of everything he needed - food, shelter and - well, not clothing.

There was no crime, no pollution and no urban crowding. It was perfect - or almost perfect.

From Day One of Adam's life, something was missing and God knew it. We know it. But Adam doesn't know it yet. (The original Hebrew here could be translated, "*And the man didn't have a clue.*")

The problem? No "other"

The world was suffering the absence of woman.

The problem Adam faced was that he no one to face. He was created, ultimately, for relationship. Relationship with the LORD God - and with others like him. And, to this point, there was no other human being with whom he could enjoy relationship.

God's assessment of the situation is blunt and to the point:

The solution: A woman!

[18] Then the Lord God said, "It is NOT GOOD (emphasis added) for the man to be alone..."

Up to this point, we have read nothing like this. So far in Genesis it's all been good. As in, "*And God saw that it was good*" or "*very good.*"

Now, something is NOT GOOD. The man's condition - perfect though it is - is incomplete. So, God is going to make paradise more so.

In Genesis 2, He assigned Adam the task of naming the animals. It was an assignment with a point. And that assignment had its intended effect. After watching Mr. and Mrs. Elephant, Mr. and Mrs. Dog, Mr. and Mrs. Lion and Mr. and Mrs. Hamster walk by, Adam is now aware of what was so obvious. He is alone.

He has always been alone. Now, though, he is lonely.

He wasn't any more alone after naming the animals than he had been prior to the naming. But now he knows that something, someONE, is missing.

He needs another. A partner, a companion, a soulmate.

Watch, as God goes to work again.

[21] So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. [22a] The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man...

The Hebrew word used to describe this "fashioning" is fascinating. The Bible tells us that the LORD God **made** (or "built") the man. But He **fashioned** (or "sculpted") the woman. And something precious was taken from him (a rib, or, more accurately "*He took from his side*").

Most poetically, Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote centuries ago, "*God did not make the woman out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved.*"

After the surgery and the fashioning of the woman, God woke Adam up and brought Eve forward.

A delightful solution

[22b] ...and brought her to the man. [23] The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

That exclamation (!!) is followed by what has been called the Magna Carta of marriage.⁶

⁶ You will notice, also, that child-bearing (which is mentioned in chapter 1) is not even hinted at in chapter 2. Procreation - the bearing of children - is considered an added blessing, but is not linked to the essence of marriage. Procreation is not the purpose of marriage or of the sex act. The creation of a one-flesh unit between a man and a woman is the purpose of marriage.

The words of the last two verses of Genesis 2 are graphic. They speak of a physical union. But they also speak of a very personal union.

The goal of marriage

[24] For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. [25] And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Now obviously, these words are not for the benefit of Adam and Eve - they had no parents to leave!

What is happening is that Moses (the author of Genesis) has broken into the narrative to address his audience, both the audience of his day (1500 BC) and us, today. These words define marriage: One man and one woman, united in one life without fear of exploitation.

Marriage is the well-publicized⁷ event in which a man and a woman proclaim that they are leaving their families of origin to create a new union, a new family (and in most societies, as in ours, it is also with the sanction of the state).

And the one-flesh nature of marriage is all-encompassing.

It involves the physical, the sexual. Husbands and wives say to each other, *“I won’t have sex with anyone but you.”* And they also say, *“I will have sex with you!”*

Tenderly, lovingly, they tell each other over and over again in all kinds of ways over the course of years, *“I give to you the most intimate parts of my body. The parts that never see the light of day are yours.”*

The Bible says that ***“they shall become one flesh”*** and so sexual union and sexual activity and sexual play is to be the norm in marriage.

But one-fleshness goes beyond the physical to the social, to the emotional, to the spiritual.

It is a growing union of two lives that become so intertwined that they form an inseparable, God-sealed bond.

To be ***“naked and not ashamed”*** is to live without fear of being exploited. These newlyweds, Adam and Eve, are enjoying the perfect ease of genuine love and trust.

Marriage is a God-ordained context for intimacy. Marriage is designed by God to unite lives. The wedding day of a couple is the launch date into a life together.

And what Abraham and Sarah model for us is what God intends that every couple should enjoy. Union.

They began an epic journey that took them from Ur to Haran to Canaan. They traveled every step of the way TOGETHER - and that was exactly the way God wanted it.

In the same way, you and your spouse are on an epic journey together. That journey involves your emotional life and your physical life and your financial life and your sexual life and your spiritual life. It is all a part of this one-flesh adventure that will last from now for as long as you both shall live.

And the journey is to be marked by oneness, the unmistakable goal of marriage. And like spokes radiating out from a hub, where there is oneness, grace, openness, commitment, transparency, vulnerability, and acceptance will follow.

Adventuring together is a great way to view married life. As Abraham and Sarah did, we today are to view our marriages as an adventure with our spouse.

The challenge in marital adventuring, though, comes in that marriage is so very daily.

The marriage vows to which we agree when standing before a judge or a minister become, well, difficult, in the midst of life’s pushes and pulls.

⁷ In biblical times, the event the Bible calls marriage involved the whole of society. The idea of a purely private marriage is unknown.

That's the way it is with us. That's the way it was for Abraham and Sarah, too.

Married: in the Day-To-Day Grind (Genesis 12, 20, 1 Peter 3)

Abraham's "Example" (Genesis 12, 20)

Home in Canaan

Back in Genesis, Abraham and Sarah have finally made it to the Promised Land. They have traveled the length and breadth of Canaan, camping along the way, worshiping God at every stopover.

He was a hearty seventy-five year old. She was a youngish sixty five.

Everything was going well until Canaan became an ancient version of a 2008 San Antonio. Drought and famine hit hard and Abraham and Sarah had to leave to find food. They fled, reasonably, to nearby Egypt.

Home away from home - Egypt

[10] Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

As they were nearing Egypt, Abraham pulled his wife aside and spoke to her. He began with a husbandly observation.

Abraham's sweet compliment!

[11] It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to [Sarah] his wife, "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman..."

How sweet!

We're expecting Abraham to pull out the candies, the PajamaGram wrapped in a hat box, a Vermont Teddy Bear and a new nightgown.

That Abraham is sure a sweet husband. And the Bible does go on, a little bit later to confirm that Abraham wasn't just blowing smoke. Sarah was truly a beautiful woman. Sixty five years old and still a looker.

Well, Abraham's observation of Sarah's beauty was not the end of his speech. After a pause and a throat-clearing, he continues.

A compliment with a bitter twist

[13] "Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you."

See, Abraham is convinced that the Egyptians will desire Sarah for her great beauty when they see her. Then, upon discovering that he is Sarah's husband, they will kill him, but they will let her live.⁸

Watch how Abraham treats his wife. This chosen man of God is placed in a dangerous position - and he chooses self-preservation over protection of his wife. That's just not very patriarchal, very godly, very loving, very husbandly.

Let's list the problems with his plan.

- He was asking his wife to lie.
- He was leaving her to be a hot ticket among the Egyptians, who would have thought that she was single and available.
- He has put their marriage in great jeopardy.
- He has endangered her safety, her future and her virtue.

All of this so that it will ***"go well with [him]."***

Probably because she believed that she had no option, Sarah agreed to her husband's proposal and prepared to tell anyone who asked that she and Abraham were brother and sister.

Pretty ugly, huh?

And we're not finished.

⁸ He might have been correct in his estimate of the future. One of my more technical Old Testament commentaries has these lines about Egyptian beauty: *"She might very easily have appeared beautiful in the eyes of the Egyptians, whose wives, according to both ancient and modern testimony, were generally ugly, and faded early."* From Keil and Delitzsch - A Commentary on the Old Testament.

Fast forward fifteen years to another country (Gerar) ruled by another king (Abimelech) and we find Abraham doing the exact same thing a second time!

Again?!?!(Genesis 20)

[Genesis 20:1] Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. [2] Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

Here he is again trying to pawn off his wife as his sister so that it will go well with him.

Here is someone who stands as one of the most esteemed men of faith in history. He is a true man of God - and in these two instances he fails miserably as a husband.

Husbands, cherishers

And how, exactly has he failed? A wife needs to know that her husband cherishes her, that he will give his life to protect her, that she is precious to him, and that her welfare is more important to him than his own welfare.

That is surely the point of the Apostle Paul’s words in Ephesians 5.

[Ephesians. 5:25] Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her...

Abraham should have given himself up for Sarah. Instead, he turned things upside down and assigned her the role of protector.

Listen to the way the Apostle Peter puts it: ***[1 Peter 3:7] You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.***

Husbands, you and I are given this one assignment from God when it comes to marriage. We are to sacrificially love our wives. We are called to be tender with them and to protect them.

She is your life partner, the other half of a one-flesh union. She is to know that you would throw yourself in front of a Mack truck for her. She is to know that she is safe with you. She is to know that you will gladly take the bullet.

If you are a husband, are planning to be one, or ever hope to be one, don’t miss this: LOVE and CHERISH your wife!

For everyone, life is very daily. Married life can make it all seem doubly so. The daily challenges make it tough on husbands, but it’s tough on wives, too.

Sarah faced a huge challenge at home and it’s one with which most many wives here today can probably identify. It is the call of a wife to honor, to be subject to, and to respect her husband.

Sarah Honors Her Husband (1 Peter 3)

Ladies first

The New Testament addresses wives as well as husbands. Paul writes, ***[Ephesians 5:22] Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.***

And when the apostle Peter wrote, he used more words to say the same thing and in so doing called to mind the Abraham and Sarah stories we’re thinking about today.

[1 Peter 3:1] In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, [2] as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. [3] Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; [4] but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. [5] For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; [6] just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

Sarah and her “lord”

Peter mentions a time when Sarah referred to Abraham as “lord.”

Most commentators assume that the incident in view is that which is recorded in Genesis 18. At that time, the Lord told Abraham that Sarah was going to have a son (at this time, she was 89 years of age!).

Sarah overheard the announcement and *[Genesis 18:12] laughed to herself, saying, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?”*⁹

Here is Sarah, affirming by this comment that Abraham is the head of her household. She refers to him respectfully - “lord”. She honors him. That’s good and that is right.

And that is remarkable.

Remember what happened in Genesis 12, how he put her purity and safety in jeopardy by instructing her to tell Pharaoh that she was his sister. Still, she calls him “lord.”

Peter says that wives become *“Sarah’s daughters”* when they do what is right - like honoring and respecting their husbands - without being frightened by any fear.

OK. And did Sarah have reason to fear? You bet she did! He didn’t protect her when he should have.

In fact, if she had them, those fears would have been completely justified because, as we have just seen, he was very soon to do the same thing again. (Genesis 20)

She forgave him. She got over it. She continued to honor and to respect her husband. Sarah was able to do this because she refused to retreat to fear. And she was able to avoid fear because she wholly entrusted herself to God.

Wives, you have a very impressive assignment from God! You are called to respect, be subject to, and to honor a man.

Sometimes, when your man is loving you well and sacrificially, that will be a relatively easy assignment.

At other times, when you’re in a foul mood or he’s not being Mr. Wonderful, it’ll be a challenge.

And there may be times when you will face an extreme situation - times when your husband is abusive or when he seriously misbehaves - that you will be called to show your respect in bold, surprising, even counter-intuitive ways.

But in all circumstances and in all ways, you are to put all of your wonderful, creative gifts to work for your husband’s good, for his blessing.

Hey, if Sarah could do it, you can, too!

Conclusion:

What a story.

Today we’ve watched as one of the greatest heroes in the Bible, Abraham, a man esteemed for faith and for faithfulness, show an Olympic-sized capacity for cowardice and lovelessness toward his wife.

And we could go on to multiply examples of other men who also blew it. And to take a departure from the always enjoyable sport of husband-bashing, we could add examples of wives who, like Rebekah, were conniving, like Rachel, were idolatrous, or like Michal, were haughty.

It’s easy to find examples of problem marriages and lousy wives and lousy husbands in the Bible.

So here’s the deal. If Abraham and Sarah (Abraham and Sarah!!) were a mess, should any of us be surprised if we need a little work? Should any of us be hesitant in seeking help?

⁹ Isn’t it interesting that the nearly ninety year old Sarah considered that the prospect of having sex with her one hundred year old husband “pleasurable.”

You're having problems in your marriage right now? OK. Now you don't have to think that you are the only couple that is experiencing marital difficulties.

Sharon and Ozzie Osbourne had their share of problems and worked through them. So did Abraham and Sarah. So can you.

It is a big club. There are no perfect people. Therefore, there are no perfect marriages. We all need help.

The problem with Christian marriages is that we end up thinking it is against the rules to have problems. We're ashamed to admit that our marriages are not A+'s at all times.

You've probably heard that the percentage of Christian marriages that end in divorce roughly approximates the percentage of divorces among those who are not Christians.

That is a tragedy.

And it is not a tragedy that Christians have the same problems in their marriages that outsiders have. Actually, I would expect that. What is tragic is that Christians have resources to draw upon that, if engaged, would see us through to victory.

I'm talking about the resources of the Holy Spirit's power, the truths and wisdom found in the Bible and the support and counsel of our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

I'm talking about practical help that can be found in books like those on display in the foyer. Or getting ideas from really find radio programs like Family Life Today or Focus on the Family.

A one-flesh marriage (heart, soul, body) is one worth struggling for, one worth fighting for, one worth getting help for.

Where we so often fall short is in seeking help. We don't admit to problems. We fake it - at home and at church. Wives pretend all is well while the reality is that their husband is failing them miserably. Husbands stoically plod through life while their wife is behaving in hurtful ways.

But as long as things go unaddressed (remember Abraham), they likely won't get better.

We say nothing to anybody because we want to give the impression that we are a good, Christian family. So, just like the Abraham and Sarah family, problems persist, don't get any better, repeat - and destroy.

Friends, I'm hoping that today you will see the wisdom of getting honest about challenges you face at home. Get honest with yourself, with your spouse, with God and with a trusted friend or two. Take off the mask.

Don't hesitate! Get real. Get help! Today!