

# “My plan is so wonderful it *must* be from God” — and other lies we tell ourselves

Message for Sunday, October 24, 2010  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Genesis 16

This chapter of the Bible is like a diamond, with many sparkling facets, each of them wonderful. So I am going to comment on three separate sections, each with a quite different slant.

## 1) SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 16:1-3

MESSAGE: “The compass in the wilderness of doubt”

Let’s look at Sarai. She is in her golden years — how many of you hate that term? Let’s call it what it is: she’s getting old. She’s getting old, but God promises her that she will have a child. She gets excited. She visits the maternity shop and buys a few dresses. She plans her baby shower... but no child. She remodels her tent, making room for a crib... but no child. She bakes birthday cakes and then has to eat them herself... and still no child.

So Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands. There is a custom in that culture, that if you can’t get pregnant, your slave can do it for you, and then you can claim that child as your own. So she convinces Abram that time is running out. “Face it, Abram, you aren’t getting any younger, either.”

Can you picture Abram? “You want me to... you know... with Hagar?” Sarai says, “Yes, I do.” So Abram looks at Sarai, seventy-five years old. Then he looks at Hagar, twenty-two and says, “Alright, if you insist!” And Abram goes ahead with Sarai’s plan.

This is the age-old story of difficulty getting pregnant. Some of you here know that story personally.

Sarai has doubts. No, more than that: she has lost her faith altogether. She no longer trusts God, and has to do things herself. Again, some of you here know that story personally. Not necessarily about having children. Maybe it was about the way your children turned out. Maybe it was about sickness and death. Maybe it was — wait, maybe it still *is*...

If you can see yourself in this picture, know that you are not alone. You have many companions in the Bible. The Psalms contain many prayers like this one:

**Psalm 44:23-24, New Living Translation:**  
Wake up, O Lord! Why do you sleep?

Get up! Do not reject us forever. Why do you look the other way?

Why do you ignore our suffering and oppression?

In the time of Jesus, John the Baptist was thrilled to meet Jesus. He recognized him as the Messiah, and heard the voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son.” But later, when John was in prison, he sent messengers to Jesus asking, “Are you the one we have been waiting for, or should we look for someone else?” [Matthew 11:2].

Sarai is lost in the wilderness of doubt. She needs to look at her compass to find her way back to God, but instead she strikes out on her own, and gets even more lost.

When we are in our wilderness, remember the compass:

**Proverbs 3:5, New International Version:**

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart**

**and lean not on your own understanding;**

## 2) SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 16:4-6

MESSAGE “My plan is so wonderful it *must* be from God” — and other lies we tell ourselves

Sarai convinces herself, “What a great idea! This will solve all our problems.” She convinces Abram to go along with her.

But it doesn’t turn out the way she expected. Sarai has a fantasy about this cozy family. Fantasies are always fun. They are the land where everything is perfect, and all our plans work perfectly. Reality can be painful.

The tension between Sarai and Hagar increases. Abram can sense it. I imagine it isn’t a topic Abram and Sarai bring up very often at dinner.

As I spoke with the children, the worst lies are the ones we tell ourselves. Sarai listened to those voices which told her, “That’s God for you: big on promises, but small on keeping them. Since you can’t trust God, you’ll have to find your own solution. Do whatever it takes.”

What are some of the lies we use? Have you heard yourself say any of these lately?

- Of course I’m happy. Everything is OK.
- I can do it myself.
- I didn’t mean to say that.
- I’ll start doing that next week.
- ?

Next time you catch yourself doing this, stop and ask:

- If that is a lie, then what is the truth in this situation?
- What am I afraid of?
- What is my real motive?

Finally, pray and listen for God to speak to you. Learn what is his plan for you. And even more important, simply enjoy his presence, for that is life itself.

### 3) SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 16:7-16

MESSAGE: “Nobody is a nobody with God”

The real “star” of this chapter is not Abram nor Sarai. It is their slave, Hagar.

This is fascinating. Here we have the story of Abraham and Sarah, the founders of Israel, the first of the Jewish faith. They are among the great heroes of the Bible.

But in this chapter, they come off as childish, petty and cruel, well Sarai at least. Abram is no less to blame: fully aware of how Hagar is being mistreated, he says nothing. The hero in this chapter is Hagar. What makes this all the more striking is that Hagar is a slave, the lowest of the low. No, you can go even lower: she’s a foreigner, an Egyptian.

When she is abused by her master, Sarai, she runs away into the desert wilderness. Better to die out there of thirst or be killed by wild beasts, than to stay and endure the torments any longer. God sees all this, and comforts her. Even though the covenant is with Abram and Sarai, God also blesses Hagar and says that her son would also have many descendants, just like the promise to the others.

What this says to me is that nobody is a nobody with God. Everybody is a somebody. You are important to God.

Henri Nouwen was both a Catholic priest and a psychologist. He was able to make the connection between the secular and the spiritual in very profound ways. He was a professor at the Divinity schools at both Yale and Harvard, the highest ranking universities in North America. [It’s interesting that these schools trained Protestant clergy!] But he tired of the intense competitiveness found in the academic world. He left there and lived at the L’Arche home in Toronto. L’Arche is a community which welcomes people with disabilities. He was asked to be the personal helper for Adam, a man with severe disabilities. Adam couldn’t talk, nor eat or dress himself or even go to the bathroom by himself. Nouwen helped him with all these things. And he *loved* his new role. He loved Adam.

Nouwen wrote about his experience, about how Adam was *his* teacher: teaching him about love, about grace, about God. Adam loved Henri just for who he was. Adam didn’t know that Nouwen was a world famous professor from a big-shot university. All those things

which the world rates so highly — none of it mattered. And in this, Nouwen realized this is how God loves me, too: just as I am, without all that stuff.

Friends, you are precious to God. Don’t ever forget that. Tell that to your family, your friends, to complete strangers.

Jesus came as the ultimate example of this amazing love of God. The way that he lived, how he treated people show the depth of that love. His death, ironically, was also part of that love: he gave himself up for us, so that out of his suffering we can find healing and wholeness and new life.