

Surprise

Genesis 18:1-15

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It was the longest-running World Series drought in Major League baseball. It all started with a man named William Sianis and his goat Murphey. William, a native Chicagoan, and owner of Billy Goat's Tavern, had two tickets to the Chicago Cubs baseball game on the afternoon of October 6, 1945. It was game four of the World Series, and the Cubs were leading the Detroit Tigers 2 games to 1. The Cubs only needed to win two of the next four games played at Wrigley Field to take the Championship. William, a die-hard Cubs fan, hoping to bring his team some good luck at the ballpark that day, took his pet goat and tavern mascot, Murphy, with him and headed to the game.

But when he and Murphy arrived at Wrigley Field, an usher at the park's entrance informed him that no animals were allowed inside, and he would have to either leave Murphy outside or give up his tickets. Frustrated, William appealed his case to Cubs owner P.K. Wrigley who responded, "You can come in but not the goat." "Why not the goat?" William asked. "Because the goat stinks," Wrigley replied. Legend has it that William was so upset that he threw up his arms and exclaimed, "The Cubs ain't gonna win no more. The Cubs will never win a World Series game so long as the goat is not allowed in Wrigley Field!" As it turned out, he was right. The Cubs lost game four and the remainder of the games in the series, getting swept at home and out of the championship. As the players left the field dejected, William promptly sent a telegram to owner P.K. Wrigley that said "Who stinks now?"

The trouble was that the stink that William Sianis and Murphy placed on their beloved Chicago Cubs that fateful day in October 1945 didn't go away...for decades. For the remainder of William's lifetime and far beyond, the once-winning Chicago Cubs suddenly became a losing baseball franchise. Any prospect of a winning season evaporated seemingly out of thin air, the annual promise of a pennant faded into a distant memory, and World Series appearances became an impossible dream of days gone by. It was known as "The Billy Goat's Curse." From 1945 to 2003, the Cubs would not only post a largely losing record, but they would also not win a single postseason championship or make a World Series appearance, let alone clinch a title. Even after 2003, when the Cubs would make a few hopeful postseason runs, they never again made the World Series.

There were, of course, several attempts over the years by fans and others to reverse the goat's curse. In 1973, William's nephew and next-generation Billy Goat Tavern owner Sam, along with Chicago Tribune columnist Dave Condon, brought a descendant of Murphy to the ballpark in a limousine, accompanied by a red carpet

and a sign around the goat's neck reading "All is forgiven. Let me lead the Cubs to the pennant." But the goat was again denied entrance by the park's ushers, and the Cubs saw their tentative first-place lead wither away to another unsuccessful season. In the nineteen nineties and early two-thousands, amid new Cubs' ownership and chants from the crowd at a 1994 game, "Let the Goat in!" the goat was invited to the field for opening day games only to be tragically left behind in postseason travel, a mistake that correlated with more losing seasons.

When I arrived in Chicago in the fall of 2008, the Cubs had not won a World Series Championship in one hundred years. That meant one hundred seasons of selling tickets, seeding the field, adding new paint along the first baseline, restocking the hot dog buns, filling the hand-cranked onion stations, taking the field, and not a single championship. It had been so long since the Cubs had won that there was no longer anyone alive who could remember it. I quickly learned that locals had resorted to calling them the city's "lovable losers," and the unofficial annual motto of every Cubs fan was "wait until next year."

Much to my confusion and respect, Cubs fans were steadfastly loyal, showing up every April at Wrigley Field in their coats and gloves in the forty-degree spring weather, with an icy wind blowing across the outfield from Lake Michigan, to watch another season. But the team was a joke. A laughingstock. One Sunday during worship, a colleague of mine leaned over in the chancel as the congregation sang our opening hymn, "Our God our Help in Ages Past," and said, "You know which verse this is, don't you?" We were preparing to sing verse five, and looking down at my hymnal, I scanned the page for some deep theological meaning in the text but found nothing. Seeing my confusion, he leaned over again and whispered, "Verse five. It's the Chicago Cubs verse." And sure enough, there it was, truth so eternal that it was even embedded in the Presbyterian *Glory to God Hymnal*,

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream,
Dies at the opening day.

Abraham and Sarah must have felt that way—the butt of everyone's joke, a laughingstock, the town's "lovable losers" who were always "waiting until next year." Once upon a time, a long time ago, the voice of God came to them and called them to go on a new adventure, to start a new life in a new place rich with opportunities for life and ministry and growth if only they would dare to follow. And they did. Abraham and Sarah responded with faith and hope, risking everything to answer God's call. "I will make you parents of great nations; I will bless you," God told them. The trouble was that three decades had passed, and nothing had happened. Abraham and Sarah, "getting on in years," at the youthful age of seventy-five, were now—and there isn't a delicate way to say this—old. I once heard a pastoral colleague joke, "Abraham

and Sarah are so old that when they were born, the dead sea was just getting sick.” God’s promise to them was so long ago that barely anyone alive could remember it.

Added to the pain of this seemingly impossible dream of days gone by with life fading into the rearview mirror, we also learn that Sarah and Abraham have no children. The writer of Genesis tells us that Sarah is “barren.” It is hard not to say that word without cringing a little: it is something of a problematic word that sounds insensitive to our modern ears, and particularly so in our culture where women are deemed broken or incomplete if we cannot, or choose not, to have spouses or children. Not to mention, the pain of not being able to conceive a child is a grief that we don’t speak about openly or often enough, leaving many couples to carry this terrible grief silently or alone. But what is important to note here and elsewhere in scripture is that in the Bible, barrenness is not so much a judgment as it is a metaphor.

Barrenness in scripture conveys emptiness, hopelessness, and resignation. This means that many things can be barren. As Rev. Bob Henderson notes in a sermon on this text, “Land can be barren, an era can be barren, a nation can be barren, a man can be barren. Barrenness indicates the end of creativity, passion, productivity, and future hope. And so, in that way, both Sarah and Abraham are barren in this story.”² Once filled with a sense of hope and the promises of God, here they are now all these years later with no children, no future to speak of, devastated by the cruelty of grief and false promises, and without hope. How foolish they must have felt to themselves and their neighbors, embarrassed by their youthful optimism, trusting God all that time ago.

But one day, this decades-long barrenness comes to a head as Abraham sits in the shade outside of their tent and sees three strangers approaching on the horizon. Quickly leaping into action to do what his culture required, Abraham offers the strangers hospitality, food, and drink, only to discover these are not ordinary strangers but messengers from God. Thus, they already know Abraham and Sarah’s names. “Where is Sarah?” they ask. And Abraham dutifully points inside. Knowing that she is close by and can overhear them, the strangers stand in front of Abraham and repeat the long-ago promise of God: “I will return to you, and when I do, Sarah will have a son.”

I don’t know how closely you followed along with the scripture, but this is hilarious, completely laughable. Sarah and Abraham are now ninety and one hundred years old, respectively. Telling them that they will now have a baby is as much of a joke as if someone sat down in their seats at Wrigley Field on the first day in April and proclaimed “I know for *certain* that this year the Chicago Cubs will win the World Series.” And so, Sarah does what I imagine almost all of us would do. She laughs. She laughs with a kind of hard-earned cynicism that quietly covers over deeper grief, slapping her knee with her ears hunched up in her shoulders, belly shaking, and tears streaming into the crevasse of her now worn and weathered skin. She can hardly contain herself while considering building a nursery wing addition to the retirement home.

And when she is finally all out of breath and laughter and tears, there is a delightful little exchange as the messengers of the Lord ask Abraham and Sarah “Why did Sarah laugh?” Sarah responds, “I didn’t laugh.” “Oh yes, you did!” they reply. “No, I didn’t,” Sarah counters. “Yes, you did!” And then, the messengers ask the question that lingers at the very heart of this story and the one that I think almost all of us ask deep down in places we don’t like to talk about very much: Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr famously wrote, “Humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer,” which, in this case, turns out to be true because fast forward, and sure enough, Sarah conceives and bears a son whom Abraham and Sarah name Isaac, which in Hebrew means laughter. And when Isaac is born, Sarah laughs again as she holds her son in her wrinkled arms, but this laughter is different. This time, Sarah’s laughter is not born out of pain but emerges from God’s surprising and unlikely grace. “God,” she says, “has brought laughter to me.”

In his commentary on the book of Genesis, distinguished Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that this story is foundational to the roots of our faith because, ultimately, it is a story about the very character of God.⁴ God, who is not known as an abstraction or a structured set of beliefs or a remote power somewhere far up in the clouds creating the world and then leaving us to our own devices, but God, who is a trusted presence, God as active love. A God who showed up in the barren lives of two people who are resigned to their closed future and interrupted their circumstances with the kind of grace that moves them from hopelessness to hope, from resignation to possibility, from barrenness to abundance, and from death to life. And when God does, Abraham and Sarah find great humor and joy in God’s ability to break into their lives with something completely surprising and new.

Although, I am not sure we are tempted to see it that way in every circumstance. Truth be told, sometimes life’s surprises aren’t welcome. I love something that distinguished preacher Edmond Steimle once said on the subject. “At my age,” he quipped, “the promise that God’s mercies are new every morning is, at best, a mixed blessing. I have come to a point in my life when I don’t want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast as normal. At my age, I can do without a lot of newness.”⁵ If you are like me, perhaps you can think of times when you can appreciate how Steimle feels, especially in seasons where we are essentially satisfied and settled with our lot, sometimes even inviting a sense of control—however false—over our circumstances. God’s surprising grace can sound more like a threat than a promise in those moments.

But when life is hard and our circumstances are difficult, this God who interrupts our lives and the world is very good news indeed. It is a fundamental promise of our faith, witnessed repeatedly throughout scripture: God who will make a way where

there is no way. God who will make a way through the sea, through the diagnosis, through the divorce, through the grief, through the job loss, through the addiction, and through the pain. And this is not about trusting in a prosperity Gospel where God shows up like Santa Claus to fix it all or give us exactly what we want exactly when we want it. But it is about a God who can be trusted to be faithful and promises to show up and be with us no matter the depth of pain or the hopelessness of our circumstances, and, not to give us what we want but to provide us with all the surprising grace we need, reminding us that the future is always open with God.

Shortly after midnight on the evening of November 3, 2016, with a slim one-run lead, two strikes, two outs, and a man on base in the bottom of the tenth inning, Chicago Cubs closing pitcher Mike Montgomery struck out Cleveland Indians hitter Michael Martinez, breaking a one hundred and eight-year losing streak. The once “lovable losers” of the near northside, the Chicago Cubs, had won the World Series. Sadly, I no longer lived there but watched along with the world. There was complete bedlam in the city as Chicagoans of all ages poured into the streets from inside the bars and out from behind their television sets. People were cheering and dancing and crying and, yes, laughing. But this time, their laughter was different. It was no longer the cynical laughter of a losing team and countless losing seasons, but the laughter of unexpected, surprising joy. And the image they chose for the side of their championship ring? A goat.

Truth be told, I don’t think God’s love intercedes in the outcome of baseball games—even for the Cubs. But I believe God’s love intercedes in your life and mine. I believe in a God of beautiful surprises who makes a way where there is no way, a God who, precisely when we are resigned and without hope, breaks into our lives with new life and new possibilities, a God so surprising that death itself becomes an occasion for new life, a God of an empty tomb and a risen Lord, a God for whom nothing is too wonderful.

Notes

1 “The Billy Goat Curse—the World-Famous Billy Goat Tavern,” 2016, <https://www.billygoattavern.com/legend/curse/>.

2 Bob Henderson, “Covenant Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC, Worship Archive,” n.d., www.covenantpcsb.org.

3 Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humor and Faith,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert MacAfee Brown (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987), 49–60.

4 Walter Brueggemann, “The Laughter of Sarah,” in *Genesis* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 157–162.

5 Thomas Long, “Growing Old and Wise on Easter,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2001.