

Picture it. Burl Ives as Abraham - you remember him, he was the snowman with a top hat and mustache in the Claymation, Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer. And let's see...how about we cast Angela Lansbury as Sarah, though she'll always be Jessica Fletcher from *Murder, She Wrote* or the voice of Ms. Potts in the animated *Beauty and the Beast* to me.

Or better yet, our beloved Al Stuckey is 101, just one year older than Abraham. Imagine sweet Al getting ready to have a son. Or how about Adelaide Silkworth who is 95. The story says that Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born - can you imagine? Maria del Carmen Bousada de Lara is the oldest verified mother; she was 66 years and 358 days old when she gave birth to twins. The two oldest women on record to give birth both used IVF and donor eggs.¹ There is apparently a woman in India who is believed to be in her 70's and gave birth to a son.² Can you imagine? I can't. Which is of course the whole point. That we cannot even imagine this scenario.

And usually this impossible part of the story is what grabs our attention. This old couple beyond their child bearing years, hearing the promise of having a child. It seems unreal and way out of line with **how** we know the whole baby making business to operate. Besides the statement, *this child is a pure joy*; I think the other most commonly said statement by a grandparent is, *this is why you have children when you are young*.

Old men and women do not have babies. Literally in verse 12 when Sarah questions, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" um, *pleasure* is probably a reference to a Hebrew word having to do with moisture - meaning Sarah was dried up, literally her womb has withered in her old age.³ It was not possible to have a child. Which is exactly why God is meddling.

Perhaps one of the central arcs of the whole biblical story is God's promise of the possible in the midst of the impossible, which is certainly apparent in this story. But what else are we really being asked to believe about this story?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pregnancy_over_age_50

² <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/woman-in-her-70s-may-be-oldest-ever-to-give-birth/#>

³ W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001 pg. 170

Because to *believe* this story is a funny thing. We tend take one side or the other: "I'd never laugh if God came to my tent and told me I'd have a child." Or maybe we take the opposite approach, "Of course I'd laugh if I were 90 years old and was told I would have a kid. Who would believe a promise like that?" I might cry if God told **me** that.

So no matter which side we decide to land on, this story is one that is just plain hard to *believe*. So what if another reading of this story could point out to us today a different sort of believing?

There are so many stories that seem hard to believe in our Scriptures, aren't there? Balaam and his talking donkey; Jonah and the big fish we all think is a whale; Jesus who walks on water! I mean come on. But if we are honest, church isn't a place where we often will admit that some of what this book says is hard to believe. This whole manner of what the church expects us to believe, to confess, some of it is hard to swallow. This will come as no surprise that we, today have married faith and belief so that they are almost the same words - words that of course have everything to do with intellectual affirmations.

Can we *rationally believe* a story where a 90 year old woman has a baby? Or can *blindly believe* that 100 year old man can still produce an heir? This manner of *believing* has gotten us into trouble. When it comes to belief we have decided that we will occupy two distinct camps - those who take everything in this book as factually true and call ourselves *Bible-believing* or we will only take the parts that seem plausible as true and call it *our faithful reading*.

And in deciding to choose one or the other we have become more divisive and biting within our Christian family. We too often pick up the sword of the spirit, wielding God's word as though it really were a sword - meant to pierce and protect; to separate **us** from **them**. From true believers and posers.

Perhaps without meaning to, we developed a system in our churches, for at least several centuries or so, that is based off of our best understanding of belief; a formula for becoming one of us, that involves the 3 B's - belief, behave and belong. But it wasn't always this way.

For years, before belief was all in the head, belief was a matter of the heart. Whit and I each preached sermons during the series on the Lord's Prayer a few years ago where I know we both talked about how *to believe* meant you were willing to give your heart, your trust, your loyalty to something. So in this case, in the older sense of the word belief, Christians and Jews before us would not have read this story and then demanded you believe it as a fact in order to prove you belonged and knew the faith.

This story in the older sense of *belief* would be a way of teaching the community and asking, would you be willing to take the leap - and give your heart to a God who hears the cry of an old, withered, childless couple and gives them a son? Can you give your heart and trust and loyalty to that God; a God who might do this sort of thing? Can you imagine reading this story this way? Not mining it for facts but giving your heart to it? Can you imagine?

Because you see there is a different the formula (*of belief, behave, belong*) embedded within the story itself. The ancient world is full of gods - each tribe had their own god. Your tribe, your family, your clan tells the story of your ancestors trusting a God who promises descendants as numerous as the stars where there were none. Possibility in the midst of impossibility. So the question is again, would you give your loyalty to this God? Would you give your trust to this God? Would you give your heart to this God?

Which brings us back to the 3 B formula. As I said we've been doing things backwards for a while now. If belief was about trust and loyalty, if it was a matter, not of the head but of the heart, then you'd have to consider the question: how do any of us come to a decision to trust or how do we decide where to attach our loyalty? Trust and loyalty aren't instant and they aren't intellectual, **they are relational.**

To give your heart to something, you must first belong to it; then belonging to it, you will learn something about it so that it become a part of how you live and then you will be ready after living it out to give your heart to it.

Nowadays we, the church, can be perceived as being more concerned with intellect of over action. We value what you say, sometimes more than what you might do. We insisted, (*though I'm sure with the best intentions*) that right belief was paramount and that starting with right belief led to a well formed Christian ethic and life. And that idea led to that formula of *belief, behave and*

belong. As that idea grew, it became a standard or rule that crept into our churches unnoticed. If you want to be one of us, first you should agree with what we believe - our creeds and doctrines.

If you believe like we do, then we'll want teach you to act like us, - perhaps even ready to defend our right belief - and once we see that you can do that, then you can belong to our group, our church. This is how it has been for as long we can remember. Church turned this formula, *belief, behave, belong* into catechism, character formation and confirmation. Believe, behave and belong.

Hear this formula this way and see how familiar it really is:

At birth, Christian children [are] either baptized or dedicated, with sponsors and parents answering belief questions on their behalf, promising to teach them the faith [and we just acted this out!]. As children [grow], Sunday schools and catechism classes [teach] Christian doctrine and the Bible, ensuring that each generation [will know] the intellectual content of the tradition. Eventually, children moved from Sunday school classrooms to "big church," where they [participate] in grown-up church practices and [learn] how to pray, worship, sing, give alms, and act kindly. When a Christian child [reaches] an age of intellectual and moral accountability - somewhere between seven and fifteen - the church would offer a rite of full membership in the form of communion, confirmation or adult believers baptism. Believe, behave, belong. It is almost second nature for Western people to read the religious script this way.⁴

But Abraham & Sarah's story and in fact much of the witness of the New Testament reverses this order. Instead of *believe, behave, belong* - this story and others - the Bible teach us the reverse, *belong, behave, believe*.

Let's go back to Abraham and Sarah. What most of us notice in this story is old couple being promised a son. But this isn't the first time this couple has heard this promise of a son. The same promise occurs in the chapter 17 right before this. And the chapter 17 promise of a son is told in the larger context of

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* HarperOne 2012 pg. 201

the story of **God choosing Abraham** and entering into a covenant relationship with him and his descendants. And even chapter 17 is a retelling of the establishment of the covenant in chapter 15. Which means that if we take a step back and look at this broadly, in each of these stories, Abraham is chosen to be God's first - to enter into a covenant relationship and belong to God, first and foremost. He is being asked to choose to accept the invitation of this God over all the others to be in a relationship with. Belonging in this covenant relationship with God meant Abraham learns to live differently. ***The ethic of this covenant is to be a blessing.*** Be a light to all the other tribes and families show God's mercy and love to the nations; that is how Abraham is to behave, as a blessing. Abraham is not to declare war on other clans or tribes in the name of his God; no, his behavior and the behavior of his family is to be a blessing.⁵ And his being a blessing is the result of his belonging.

Reversing the church's formula to a more biblical one where the 3 B's are now **belong, behave, believe**, you'll notice that isn't right belief that leads to a faithful life or a promised heir. Believing God's promise isn't first, belonging and living out the blessing are first, then comes a promise to believe in, then comes the request to give your heart to this God and trust he will return and give you a son. This small tribe, this aging family shows us that we don't first *believe, behave and then belong*, **first we belong**, then we learn how to *behave* and now we then we will come to *believe*.

When Jesus calls disciples, he doesn't ask them what they believe about him or about God. He invites them to join him in ministry, Come and follow me. Come, and belong. Watch what I do and then you do what I've done.

In Matthew, Jesus first calls the 12 to be disciples and then he sends them out to behave like him - heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. The disciples don't come to belief first, they come to it last; after they belong to Christ as disciples; after they learn to behave like him and do great things in his name. After all that, they can declare to everyone, "this Jesus is the Messiah, the one who was promised to us. This is who we give our hearts to, this God is the god we will be loyal to!"

Can we be convinced that the Spirit might be turning the tide? Can we listen if the Spirit is saying that people don't have to believe first and behave in order

⁵ Rob Bell, What is the Bible? How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel About Everything HarperOne 2017, pg. 12

to belong? Because if we can reverse the 3 B's to a proclamation that first and foremost says, you, and you and you and all the people who've decided that church isn't for them -if we can proclaim, come, see what we are about, you belong here with us, isn't that more like Christ, isn't that more like the biblical witness than demanding they believe our creeds and doctrines?

And wouldn't it be wonderful if then, just maybe, the more we try to behave like Christ, rather than behaving according to our beliefs, that trust and a sense of loyalty will be what opens the door for the possible to blossom in the impossible? A new pattern, really an old pattern right there throughout the greatest story we tell. Can you imagine that?

Can we speak these things to the world? Can we reverse the 3 B's so that the world might feel the way we do about this wonderful and awesome God whom we give our hearts to? Can we, church, begin anew in the old pattern; belong, behave, believe?

Little Garland belongs to Christ. She belongs to us. That is what we already know. We are loyal to the God who says she has always belonged. Our work oh church, is to help her life look like Jesus. To read and teach her this beautiful story wherever God is always meddling in the midst of the impossible for the divine work of the possible. This too is her story, she already belongs. And then in the power of the Spirit, we pray that even our little Garland will come to believe and give her heart, her trust, her loyalty to this Christ. Can you imagine?