

The danger of spiritual shortcuts

Genesis 16 / Matthew 4.1-11

If you're like me, you've probably had the experience I'm going to describe for you. You are traveling and you are a bit lost but you think you know a shortcut. Those who are with you are not too convinced by your shortcut. They prefer to stay on the main road, the route proposed by the GPS. But you insist. And after a few junctions in the street, you begin to doubt. "I don't recognize that. It has changed since the last time." You don't want to look like you're lost, but the rest of your group are starting to have doubts.

And then after half an hour, your nerves shredded, you are forced to throw in the towel, turn back and follow the road you had left to take your shortcut. What was supposed to be a shortcut took much longer than the road you had left. Your idea was not so bright after all.

And in chapter 16 of Genesis, we see a couple trying to take a shortcut. We see a godly couple who choose to leave the path of faith, the path of obedience. The couple is Abram and Sarai. They have made a long journey that began in Ur of the Chaldeans, a journey of faith in the promises of God. If we made a film that described their lives, for the most part, it would be Abram the main character. Most of the sections we have read begin with, "Abram" or, "the Lord said to Abram." But this morning, the camera is more on Sarai. We've already seen Abram's faith put to the test. In chapter 16, it is Sarai's faith that is examined under a microscope. We will see Sarai facing a huge difficulty. What will she do to overcome it? Will she trust God? Will she choose to walk the path of faith? And Abram? What will he do? Sarai and Abram are at a crossroads. They have a choice: continue living by faith or take a shortcut? And we will see that Sarai chooses to take a shortcut and that Abram follows it.

A painful trial.

Why are Abram and Sarai in this situation? What's going on in their lives? What is the crossroads? In chapter 15, God comes to Abram to strengthen his faith through a covenant, a covenant sealed with blood. God pledges to bless Abram, to fulfill his promises. He repeats his promises: "a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." Your descendants will be more numerous than the stars. I will give this country to your descendants. Chapter 15 ends with a magnificent promise. Abram's faith is strengthened. He must have taken great pleasure in talking about these moments with his wife. But at the start of Chapter 16, there is a problem. This is a problem that we already saw in chapter 11.30: "Sarai was sterile: she had no children." And in chapter 16.1 we read: "Sarai, Abram's wife, had not given him any children." Verse 3 tells us that they have lived in the land of Canaan for 10 years. That means that more than 10 years after the first promise of a descendant, still no children. 10 years of waiting. 10 years of frustration. 10 years of disappointment, month after month. The pain, the pain of being childless, is a pain that only those who have experienced it can really understand.

Let me pause here to speak a word of pastoral advice. Make it a rule in your life never to comment to a childless couple, never to ask "still no patter of little feet"? I don't know how many times I have heard such comments within the church, even in our church in Orvault, in front of others and I have seen the pain and suffering in the eyes of the couple. They smiled but behind the smile, there was suffering. If a couple wants to talk to you about this delicate subject, let them come to you. This is especially not a matter for joking or for clumsy comments. It's not up to you to say anything. I know that in a lot of churches, including ours, couples have unfortunately suffered a lot because of foolish comments. And the suffering of Abram and especially Sarai is made worse by the fact that God had promised them a child. Yes, God had repeated and confirmed his promises. He had entered into an alliance through a blood ceremony. But they have been waiting for 10 years. Sarai and Abram are getting older. They don't have much time left. The biological clock is ticking.

God, will he act? Can God act? After ten years of pain and disappointment there is a real dilemma for Sarai. Continue to wait, continue to believe, or to look for a solution herself. If she keeps waiting and God does nothing, it will be too late. And in Sarai's mind, there is perhaps the thought that the promise was made to Abram. Abram will have descendants. Abram will have a son. "God told him that his heir would come from him but he did not say he would be **my** son. " One can imagine that these thoughts torment Sarai day and night, week after week, month after month, year after year. God seems to be slow in fulfilling his promise. Maybe we should help God find a solution? Should we give God a little push? Again, we see a choice. It is a choice either to live by faith in God, in his Word, the God of the Covenant, or to find your own solution. Is this God trustworthy or not?

A double failure

There are stories in the Bible where you can look at the characters and say without hesitation: Imitate him, imitate her. And for most of Abram's life, so far, we've been able to say, Imitate him. Imitate his faith, imitate his obedience, his commitment. But there, in chapter 16, Abram and Sarai, one cannot say "imitate them". Look at the failure of this couple.

Sarai

Sarai's thinking pushes her to assume that what is blocking the fulfillment of the promise is her. In verse 2 she says, "Since the Lord has kept me from having children." According to his way of thinking, if Abram is going to have a descendant, it will not be with Sarai. Another solution will have to be found.

And the solution concocted by Sarai is to find a surrogate mother. It was a solution that existed at the time. Historians tell us that in Near East marriage contracts, there was often a clause which stipulated that a sterile woman could give her husband one of her servants so that the servant could bear a child instead of the sterile wife. The society of the time allowed this possibility and Sarai proposes it to Abram. Sarai does not say that Hagar would become Abram's wife. She would simply be a surrogate mother. After the birth, the child would be given to Sarai and Abram and life could go on happily.

This is a solution already prescribed by the law of the time. This is a solution that will give a much-needed boost to the fulfillment of God's promise. Here is a solution which will settle the problem of the sterility of Sarai. Shouldn't we applaud Sarai for her creativity, for showing initiative? At first, Sarai's solution seems to work. Hagar agrees to it. Abram follows his wife's proposal and, what do you know, Hagar becomes pregnant. Could it be said that God even chooses to bless this solution? It worked! Except that his solution, a solution that seems to tick all the right boxes, is not the solution of faith. It's not God's solution. Worse than that, it is a solution that bypasses the will of God and that disobeys the law of God. At first it seems to work but from the moment in the text where we see that Hagar becomes pregnant, we have a whole series of failures and suffering.

We have already seen that the trial is very real, very painful. The suffering of Sarai and Abram is terrible, but that does not justify disobedience to the will of God. Disobedience to the Word of God can never be justified.

We have already seen that her motivation was good. She wants God's promise to be fulfilled. The problem is that she finds a solution outside of the will of God. God said in Genesis 2:24 that marriage was a relationship between one man and one woman. This is the model chosen by God. Sarai has no respect for this relationship between men and women in the context of marriage. Sarai looks at what God had given and she decides that it is not enough, that she needs more. She says to God, what you have given us is not enough.

And then look at verse 2: Some commentators say that there is bitterness, even anger, in the words of Sarai: "Since the Lord has kept me from having children." She says she has to act because God has not given her what she needs. There is discontent with God. You see how, very subtly, she blames someone else, even God. She does the same thing in verse 5 when she realizes that her idea is not such a good one. She becomes angry with Abram: "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. May the Lord judge between you and me!" Instead of humbling herself and accepting her fault, Sarai loses her temper and tries to blame others. She is horribly cruel to her servant Hagar. Instead of asking her forgiveness, she becomes jealous of her and mistreats her: "So Sarai mistreated Hagar" (v6).

What lesson is there for us here? Sarai's shortcut shows us that a solution that is against the will of God, even if it is approved by the world, even if it seems to work, even if it solves the problem, it is never the right one. And as we face various trials: financial, work, relational, in the family, in the church, the temptation is always to follow the advice of the world, to follow the path that gives a faster solution. We follow the advice that seems to work for others but that is against the word of God. There is a desire to act, to find a quick solution instead of waiting for God to act. Motivation can be very good. Nothing is said here about the motivation of Sarai and Abram. But they act without God, without seeking the face of God, without waiting for God.

Think of believers having financial difficulties. When declaring their taxes, they are tempted to take a short cut. If God gave us more money, we wouldn't have to do this. Besides, we know other people who do it, other Christians.

We apply for a job. We have already been rejected many times. We have prayed that God would provide but he did not seem to answer prayer. So in the application letter, we add elements that are not entirely true.

But no one will know. And if I get the job, I can stay in the church to serve the Lord.

Impatience with God, dissatisfaction with God, fear that God has forgotten. There is a temptation to take a shortcut, to act without God. Dear friends, faced with problems, difficulties, trials, are you looking for solutions according to the wisdom of this world? Are you just looking for a solution that works? Or are you looking for the face of God, the will of God, even if you have to wait? Even if the wait is long, painful? Here is a call to wait, to hope, to trust God, in all circumstances.

Abram

And Abram, what can we say about Abram, about his failure? In verses 1 and 2, our attention is on Sarai, her situation, what she decides. Abram is seen at the end of verse 2: "Abram listened to Sarai's voice." Go back in time to Ur of the Chaldeans. There, Abram listens to the voice of God. In Haran, Abram listens to the voice of God. In Canaan, Abram listens to the voice of God. During his vision, his dream, Abram listens to the voice of God. And every time he listens to and obeys the voice of God, he acts like a man of faith. But then he listens to his wife's voice. And when the Bible says this, it means this: Abram listened to Sarai's voice and Abram accepted the solution which she proposed. And that's Abram's failure. Abram should have said "Stop" to his wife. He should have told her that her solution was simply not possible. "I understand your grief. I recognize what you want to do here, but I can't take this woman. You are my wife. If

God promised me a descendant, you will be the mother. Let's trust God. Do not lose faith. Let's stay in the will of God." The text makes us believe that there is no debate, no hesitation, no scruples. Verse 4 "He went to Hagar, and she became pregnant." What a failure on the part of the man of faith. In his role as husband, his role as spiritual head of the home, in his role as spiritual shepherd for his wife, total failure. And the failure continues further on in verse 6. Hagar falls pregnant and there is this terrible jealousy and hostility between Agar and Sarai. Abram is the head of the family. It is up to him to help these women find a solution, to make peace. He knows what is going on between these two women. He sees Sarai's attitude towards Agar. And we know that Abram is good at helping people find a solution to their relationship difficulties. He did it with Lot. But instead of helping them be reconciled, he washes his hands of the case in verse 6 and says, "Your servant is in your hands; Do with her whatever you think best." He should have told Sarai to stop mistreating her servant. But Abram abandons Agar to his fate. And Sarai mistreats her because Abram does not have the courage to tell the truth to his wife. Abram lacks the courage to tell his wife that his solution is against the word of God. For the sake of a quiet life he turns a blind eye.

Does this sad episode between Abram and Sarai remind you of something? Another couple? A woman dissatisfied with what God had given her. A woman who assessed the situation and acted outside of God's will? A woman who took what was forbidden and gave it to her husband? A husband who took what his wife gave him? A husband who neglected his responsibilities, who should have said "stop" to his wife but who listened to her? A husband who refused to take responsibility? A couple who blamed each other, even blamed God? History is repeating itself. Abram and Sarai repeat the sin of Adam and Eve. They make the same mistakes. But doesn't it also remind us of us all? Our choices are governed by our selfishness, by our desire to do what suits us best.

Dear friends, we need courage to say "no" to the choices that distance us from God and his word. Individually, in our families, in the church, we need the courage to say "no" to anything that will take us away from God, the path of obedience. It takes courage to say "no" to others sometimes. But we must say "no" disobedience to the will of God, rather than just turning a blind eye for the sake of a quiet life. Let's be vigilant. Let us encourage one another to walk according to the Word, according to what is right.

But what about the person who has taken or is taking a spiritual shortcut, who is leaving the path of obedience to the will of God? The shortcut of Sarai and Abram had extremely serious consequences. We will see that in the coming weeks. And we know that the disobedience of Adam and Eve had disastrous consequences for humanity. But the God of grace does not allow disobedience and sin to have the last word. Yes, sin is serious but God is a God who provided a savior. This passage describes human beings who give in to the temptation to take a shortcut. But it also directs us to one who has experienced the same temptations but who has overcome the temptation. This passage directs us to the Lord Jesus. His Father had promised him a Kingdom with spiritual descendants. And throughout his ministry, Jesus had to wait. During his ministry, he did not see his Kingdom coming in all its fullness. And he was tempted to take a faster, easier path. Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus just had to bow down before him. A faster, easier solution. Throughout his ministry Jesus had to resist the crowds who wanted to make him their king to drive out the Romans. Why wait? Above all, why go through the suffering and death of the cross? There is another way, faster, easier. When Jesus heard the voice of one of his closest friends, a voice that said "No! Jesus, you will not go to the cross", Jesus did not listen to the voice which told him to take the shortcut. He didn't give in like Adam did, like Abram did. Jesus had the courage to say "No". Jesus followed the path given by his Father. He trusted his Father. He obeyed his Father. And he saw his Father's promises fulfilled. This passage directs us to Jesus, to the cross of Jesus, to the place where Jesus said what Sarai and Abram did not say: May your will be done and not mine. Abram may be our father in the faith, but Abram is not our savior. It's Jesus our Savior.

And when Jesus calls us to follow him, there is no shortcut. You want to follow Jesus but on the path you see the cross which you will have to carry. There is no shortcut to avoid the cross. You want to follow Jesus but on the path before you, you see daily repentance. There is no shortcut to avoid repentance. You want to follow Jesus but you see on the path the sacrifices he will ask you to make. There is no shortcut to avoid sacrifices. You want to follow Jesus but you see persecution and hostility along the way. There is no shortcut to avoid them.

Jesus did not take a shortcut and he is calling us this morning to follow him.