

# Substitution

The Rev. Dr. E.  
Stanley Ott

Genesis 16

**Sermon Series:**  
A Journey of Faith –  
A Study on the Life  
of Abraham

*The story of  
Abram and  
Sarai, who  
are ultimately  
known as  
Abraham and  
Sarah, is one  
of the most up  
and down, up  
and down like  
a roller  
coaster stories  
of faith  
imaginable....*

There is a small, family park in the city of Pittsburgh known as Kennywood, which is famous for its roller coasters—with old wooden coasters and super-fast, modern, twisting, turning steel ones. All of the coasters have names such as the Thunderbolt, with its wild curving ride, the Racer, that pits two roller coasters in a race alongside each other and the Steel Phantom, one of the most crazy, fastest roller coasters in the world. I happen to be a fan of the wooden roller coaster known as the Jack Rabbit. There are very few twists and turns. It's just up and down, up and down, with all the crazy people next to you holding their arms and hands in the air and screaming like crazy. Ok, so I am one of the crazy people. If the Jack Rabbit up and down coaster was given another name, I have a suggestion. Call it the Abram-Sarai roller coaster. The story of Abram and Sarai, who are ultimately known as Abraham and Sarah, is one of the most up and down, up and down like a roller coaster stories of faith imaginable—that is until you or I look into the mirror, make an honest assessment of our own spiritual life and realize this

spiritual Jack Rabbit coaster could be named after you—or after me.

We are in the early stages of a sermon series, “A Journey of Faith: A study on the life of Abraham”—or, more fully, a study of the life of Abraham and Sarah. As Pete has said, “Our destination in this journey is discovering what it means to live by faith. [But] be forewarned, it was a struggle for Abraham to learn how to live by faith” and as Glenda put it, “We see how God moved him from a place of orientation, through a period of disorientation, to a new place of reorientation.” Indeed, in his roller coaster story, Abraham, or Abram as he is first called, seems to oscillate from orientation to disorientation to orientation to disorientation—up and down, up and down. “Up like a rocket ship, down like a roller coaster, fast like a loop-the-loop and round like a merry-go-round” (*Palisades Park*, Freddy Cannon, 1962). A roller coaster life of faith through which he eventually learned to trust God no matter what was going on around him. So may we.

To set the stage for today's part of their story, we see two ups and one down have already taken place. As you know, the

***Abram is being asked to leave the comfortable known and move into the unknown in pursuit of a vision he would not live to see come to fruition.***

story begins in Genesis 12, where we learn Abram and Sarai were living in a community known as Ur of the Chaldees. It is the Hamptons, Hilton Head, Martha's Vineyard of his time. Abram and his wife Sarai have a good life and although they are childless, they share life with their wider family and friends. Abram is seventy-five years old and Sarai is sixty-five. Probably retired, collecting Social Security and a member of the Chaldean Association of Retired Persons (CARP), minding his own business. Life's been a pleasing adventure. And then, God speaks to Abram: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation.

Abram is being asked to leave the comfortable known and move into the unknown in pursuit of a vision he would not live to see come to fruition. The Book of Hebrews reports Abram, "by faith... obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." So the roller coaster starts going up as God promises to bless Abram and Abram trusts and obeys. What Sarai was thinking through all of this we don't know but I have to think she had mixed feelings—Abram, you want me to leave our home, our extended families, friends, our cushy existence across the street from Whole Foods for an extended road trip

on camels?—To her credit, she goes with him.

Almost immediately, the roller coaster starts down. In a story Pete has discussed with us at length, they arrive in Egypt, the Pharaoh sees Sarai is a stunning beauty and Abram figures he'll be killed when Pharaoh discovers Sarai is married to him. Now wait a minute! Genesis has just told us of God's direct word to Abram, "I will make you a great nation," and speaks of Abram's offspring to come. It's hard to have children if you are dead. Nevertheless, Abram wimps out and, instead of trusting God to be faithful to God's promises, Abram makes a negative substitution—substituting Sarai's well-being for God's promises. He just throws her under the bus! "Sarai, say you are my sister not my wife." She does and Pharaoh takes her into his house. You know Sarai was an impressive woman, every bit Abram's equal. While it was true that there was a hierarchal view of marriage in those days Sarai could have easily tried to save her own skin by spilling the beans that Abram was her husband. Instead, she allows the substitution and saves him.

I can only imagine when Pharaoh eventually returns her to Abram that the first conversation between Abram and Sarai wasn't all lovey-dovey! I have a friend by the name of Wayne Alderson, a former executive in U.S. Steel, who

***Our loving  
and merciful  
God picks  
Abram right  
up again and  
makes the  
most amazing  
statements.***

went on to teach business leaders around the country the concept of the value of the person—love, dignity and respect—in the home and workplace. One day, after some extensive travel, he was on his way to his house from the airport when he decided to swing by a florist and buy a dozen roses. He gets home and rings the doorbell. His wife, Nancy, answers and, to his surprise, he watches as she sees the roses and bursts into tears. She said, “Wayne, if you love me, why don’t you value me?” I can hear Sarai saying that. “Abram, if you love me, why don’t you value me?” They have become wealthy people but their roller coaster is heading down.

Last week, Pete brought us to Genesis 15. Our loving and merciful God picks Abram right up again and makes the most amazing statements. “I am your shield Abram.” Subtitle—you didn’t have to negatively substitute Sarai for my protection. I will take care of you. God goes on, “[Eliezer of Damascus] will not be your heir, but a son who is your flesh and blood.” And Genesis reports Abram believed the Lord. Then the Lord went on to make a covenant with Abram—an unbreakable commitment—and the roller coaster of Abram’s faith is rolling up and all is well.

Until the next chapter, Genesis 16. Now the story shifts to Sarai. She knows of

the promises of God we learn of in Chapters 12, the promise of offspring and, in 15, that Abram would be the father of more descendants than the stars but hey, she’s getting older—she’s seventy-five years old, her capacity to have a child is going, going, gone. When a person wants to become pregnant and it just doesn’t happen and the time clock is ticking and all one’s friends are having kids, frankly it can be incredibly painful. “So she said to Abram, ‘The LORD has kept me from having kids.’”

Sometimes, when we have been trusting God for something to happen in our lives and it just is not happening, we, like Sarai, can start to question God’s promises or flat not believe them anymore or, as in her case, simply blame God because we aren’t getting what we want when we want it. Sarai gets an idea and says to Abram, “Go sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.” As a slave, Hagar was simply a tool to Sarai, like a hammer or a rolling pin, and not a human being of value. Sarai makes her own negative substitution, substituting Hagar for God’s promise that Sarai herself would be a mom.

“Abram agreed to what Sarai proposed.” Abram, what’s with that? Were you a thoughtful husband who honors his wife’s opinions? Or was this you saying ‘whatever you say, honey,’ as you think you

***Every single one of them substituted something for God and God's promises and wound up in much more pain than they ever anticipated.***

are actually being given permission to shack up with the maid? Or were you just wimping out before a furious wife? Or was Abram, like a lot of us who, when given the opportunity and feeling pressure to do something that we know is inappropriate, find some way to justify it and make the negative substitution our desires for God's promises. No matter how you slice it, their roller coaster is heading down hill.

Hagar conceives and gives birth to a son, Ishmael. Her story and Ishmael's are also testimony to the God who loves and never abandons His people, but that story is for another day. Significantly for Sarai, however, when Hagar became pregnant, suddenly she who was slave had something to hold over her owner and did she ever take her shot-on-goal. She knows how painful Sarai's childlessness has been and I am sure it must be in the Hebrew somewhere that Hagar says to Sarai, "Nanny, Nanny, Boo-Boo! I am PG and you aren't." Sarai is very angry and, conveniently forgetting whose idea all this was, says to Abram, "My suffering is all your fault. May the Lord judge between you and me." A way of saying, Take a hike. Go fly a kite. Abram, Go play in traffic.

Time and again God promised they would have descendants, promised to be their shield, to be their great reward and, time and again, both Abram and Sarai become

afraid or tired of waiting and they substitute their desires for God's promises, their way for God's way. Every time, they experience pain. We see this happening throughout God's Big Story. Adam and Eve substituted an apple for Eden. Esau substituted a bowl of soup for his inheritance. The Hebrews substituted a golden calf idol for the God who loved them. Out of fear Abram substituted his wife for God's security. Out of impatience, Sarai substituted her maid for God's promises

Every single one of them substituted something for God and God's promises and wound up in much more pain than they ever anticipated. Did God ever tire of them and abandon them? Never! The one-sided covenant we learned about in Genesis 15 was a promise of God's that will never be broken. So the Apostle Paul wrote, "When we are faithless, God is faithful because our God cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). Paul also said, "As many as may be the promises of God, in Jesus, they are YES!" (2 Corinthians 1:20). As Pete said last week of the one-sided covenant agreement God made with us, "The fact that God's covenant is unconditional and unilateral is really good news for us. No matter how many times we mess up, God keeps His promises."

Last summer, we studied the seven deadly sins and the seven lively virtues. We saw the same

***We suffer  
loss, yet the  
God who loves  
us will never  
abandon us.***

pattern, the substitution of pride for humility, lust for chastity, envy for kindness, sloth for diligence, anger for patience, greed for charity and gluttony for self-control. When we make the negative substitution of a deadly sin for a lively virtue of faith there is inherent pain. We suffer loss, yet the God who loves us will never abandon us. And just how do we know this? Because our God understands substitution, too! Instead of throwing Abram under the bus the way Abram threw Sarai under the bus or instead of denying Sarai a child because her plan involving Hagar backfired, God gave them both a son, Isaac. God kept His promise.

God makes the positive substitution of His grace in place of the negative substitutions of our lack of faith. Of course, there is no more vivid example of that than the person of His own son, Jesus. So we have the wonderful verse in *How Great Thou Art*: “And when I think that God, His Son not sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin.” Jesus makes the positive substitution of his life for your life and mine. It’s the best news in the world. God loves you more than you love your next breath and He has proved it.

A week ago, I opened the Metro section of the Washington Post and was greeted by a picture that I will never forget,

a picture that had already been burned into my brain thirty years ago and I imagine for many of you as well. Having grown up in Arlington, I watched hundreds, if not thousands, of airplanes leave Washington National Airport and make their way in their flight pattern over the Potomac River. So I was particularly shocked one winter’s day, January 13, 1982, when I caught an emergency news bulletin that a Boeing 737 aircraft had just left Washington National Airport, failed to gain altitude as it had not been adequately de-iced, barely crossed the 14th Street Bridge and plunged into the Potomac head first, the tail of the plane hitting the bridge, breaking off, all of this in a blinding snowstorm.

There was a man by the name of Ernie Windsor. Ernie was a paramedic whose job it was to fly with the U.S. Park Service rescue helicopter whenever there was an emergency. Ernie received word of this accident and soon he and his pilot were aloft, flying over the Potomac. Ernie said, “As we approached the sight of the wreck we could see the tail section coming out of the water and in the water was jet fuel and suitcases and a tennis racket and pieces of clothing, and as we came closer to the tail section we could see there were six people hanging on...three men, three women. Only one had a life vest. I

***Through your faith and trust in the person of Jesus our God has made a covenant with you, a covenant agreement to be the God who loves you that is utterly unbreakable.***

threw the helicopter door open and dropped the few vests we had on board down to them, took a rope and tied it to a seat belt and lowered it over the side of the helicopter.

“As I watched it, the seat belt fell in the hands of a bald-headed man, who was about fifty years old. He had a moustache. He took that rope and, to my surprise, he gave the seat belt to the woman next to him, put it over her body, and quickly we lifted her, took her to the bank where outstretched arms grabbed her, released her from the rope, and we went back. This time, I dropped two ropes over the side, and to my surprise, the bald-headed man with the moustache caught the seat belt again, but then he turned and gave it to the next woman who was by him. She was unable to put it on. The cold was beginning to take her senses away. So the man on the other side of her took the seat belt, put it over him, grabbed the two women, one in each arm, another man grabbed the other rope, and we took off. Four people were the most that we could carry and I could remember as we left that bald-headed man with the moustache watching us pull away.

“As we flew over the open water, one of the women that the man was holding on to began to slip from his grasp and suddenly she fell, landing on a piece of ice floating in the river. She was safe and we were able to get the others to safety. Five

were saved and one to go. We felt relief. Things had gone well, but we wished to come back quickly to that tail section and find the bald-headed man with the moustache. When we arrived he was gone. We came down low and began to circle looking for any glimmer or shadow under the water. I had determined that if I saw anything I was going in after him, so badly did I want that man. But we never found him.”

For thirty years I have thought about the bald-headed man. I didn't know his name until the *Post* article a week ago: Arland D. Williams, Jr. The 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge is now named after him. That pleases me very much. Arland D. Williams, Jr. was a man full of the love of God. He understood the concept of a positive substitution. When he held each of those people, helped them put the harness of rescue around them, he was loving them the way God loves you, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” said Jesus. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Through your faith and trust in the person of Jesus our God has made a covenant with you, a covenant agreement to be the God who loves you that is utterly unbreakable. So when you are inclined to make a negative substitution for something in place of God's promises, something that is less than

God's best in your life, in your home, in your work, in your conduct, take a step back from the brink. Give yourself again to the God who loves you. He won't let you down. Amen!

***Give yourself  
again to the  
God who loves  
you. He won't  
let you down.***