

Britt Carlson  
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The Community Church of Issaquah  
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## ***“Beginnings: Survival”***

Genesis 11:10-31

What does it take to survive? What does it take to get through this life with soul, spirit and body intact?

Every family has their survival stories. My friend Sarah’s family has an incredible story about their ancestors escaping Communist persecution in Ukraine and making their way across the *Himalayan mountains* to find safe harbor in India. At one point, they were on the verge of starvation when—no kidding—in the middle of godforsaken Himalayan nowhere they happened upon a large, perfectly intact, beautiful round hunk of cheese.

My own family has stories of survival, like how three generations of women managed to raise children and make a way in the world despite having alcoholic, often-absent husbands.

We, you and I, have stories of survival. And sometimes our stories of survival look as simple as names listed in the family Bible.

Gertrude Egbert born 1875. Leola Pearl Pepper born 1909. Marlys Ivanell Phelps born 1945. Britt Carlson born 1987.

Our genealogies, our list of ancestors, though they don’t tell us much, they tell us that life has gone on. We have survived. We’ve gotten through. We might not be shining, we might not be sparkly, but we’ve made it to the other side.

A genealogy is what we arrive at when we get to the end of chapter 11. Humanity, fallen though it is, is surviving. They’re making it. And that is not something to be dismissed. To survive is to live. And to live is *good*. Shem lives. Arpachshad lives, Shelah lives, Eber lives, Peleg lives, Reu lives, Serug lives, Nahor lives, Terah

lives, and Abram lives. The life which God declared good in the garden continues—even if fallen.

Life goes on.

But then something interesting happens in Scripture. And thank heavens, because we still have 65 more books of the Bible to go and who wants to read a list of name for that long!

The genealogy comes to an end. The straightforward line of father-son-father-son suddenly multiplies and divides into nephews and brothers and daughters-in-law and wives. Something is happening here in this moment of the family tree. And the Bible wants us to stop and take notice.

We are at a turning point—a point that is going to define how this family tree goes forward, a point that might be calling the survival of this family into question.

Our lives are marked by these defining moments, moments when time seems to divide and multiply and then turn back in on itself: That moment the phone call comes through and the diagnosis is delivered. The day your husband opens his mouth and out come the words, “I want a divorce.” The month you lost your both wife and your brother. It’s the moments when you know life is going to go forward, life has to go forward, but you just don’t know *how*. How can life go on?

The family of Shem is at a turning point. Life has continued on one after another, until this moment when the future of the family, the family’s survival, hits a red light on the highway of life. We are told that Abram—who is the soon

to be renamed Abraham, as in Father Abraham who had many sons—has a wife, Sarai, and Sarai is barren. She is unable to bear a child. This line that has continued father-son-father-son is in danger of abruptly being cut off.

Now maybe you're thinking, what's the big deal? They could take the money they would have spent on college and cruise the world for a year! And hey, at least now they don't have to wake up every hour on the hour to do nighttime feedings.

But, here's the thing. The first commandment for Jews is the commandment God gave in the Garden of Eden: *Be fruitful and multiply*. Jewish men and women *are required* to have children as an act of obedience to God. Being fruitful is a commandment—and it's the first commandment in Jewish life.

Surviving in a fallen world is hard. To be required to have children, to be required to go on producing life—and literally to be unable to do that, wow. The blessing of children has turned into a curse.

Now, we're not Jews and we aren't living in an age when women have to have children. We are living post-women's lib, where women can have careers and own their own property and vote—and I for one am very thankful for those things!

But even with all of that, to be a woman and want to have a child and then to find out you're infertile. That is heartbreak. That is life east of Eden.

To have a desire and have that desire be closed forever to you. To have your own body betray you, to let you down. To yearn to hold a child in your arms yet those arms remain empty. To watch as your friends get pregnant and post pictures of roly-poly babies and then to watch them grow, knowing that that is a closed door to you.

What pain.

But even more was at stake for Sarai than for us today. For Sarai having a child not only would have been a fulfillment and joy, not only would it have been obedience to God's command, it would have been a matter of status and survival.

See, women in Hebrew culture were not as lucky as women in surrounding cultures of that time. An Egyptian woman, for example, often was the head of the family, would have been able to have a share in her husband's inheritance and would have been able to take legal action. But a Hebrew woman, well a Hebrew woman wouldn't have been able to own property, or inherit, or have had any kind of social standing apart from the men in her life.

Just think about what would happen to Sarai if Abram suddenly died. Right now in our story, Sarai probably has some level of respect in the family. She's the wife of the firstborn, and she's very beautiful. That would mean she is honored in the community and that she has the economic resources needed to survive. But if Abram died, Sarai would not inherit anything. Inheritance goes to the sons and the sons only! *And Sarai doesn't have a son*. She would be without support and she would be without honor in the community.

Sarai's inability to conceive is threatening not just the survival of the familial line, it's threatening how *she herself* is going to get through life.

Now, we know how the story ends. The story ends with Sarai miraculously conceiving Isaac and Isaac being the father of Jacob and Jacob being the father of Judah and Judah being the great-great-great-great grandfather of God's son, Jesus Christ. We know that the line survives. God makes getting through life possible, when it

is impossible. God fills empty arms with cries of newborn babes.

But. In that gap between us struggling through this life and experiencing God's grace. In the gap between having empty arms and seeing them filled, there are many temptations.

When you're trying to survive, when you're trying to keep body and soul together, there can be a temptation to try to take matters into your own hands.

And Sarai is tempted to do just that. We are going to see her give her slave, Hagar, to Abram so that Hagar can bear Sarai a son in Sarai's stead. That plan does not end well. Hagar does bear a son, but that son never truly becomes Sarai's son.

True survival, true ability to get through this life takes God. And for our part it takes a willingness to wait on God. To expect God to show up and to not take things into our own hands in the meantime.

Talking about survival is especially important today when we talk about the church.

See we too have a genealogy. A spiritual genealogy of brothers and sisters in Christ.

We have two thousands years of names. Tertullian. Macrina. Augustine. Aquinas. Martin Luther. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Mother Teresa. Billy Graham. We have a family tree that stretches back to a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem. Life in the Spirit has and will go on.

But, we are at a turning point in the church. We need to pause and look closely at what's going on in the life of the church because something is at stake right now. Something is changing. We're shifting gears and the gears are starting and stopping into place.

See, if you look back over the history of the church about every five hundred years or so, there is a major shift what the church looks like. Five hundred years ago was the Great Reformation with Martin Luther and the Catholic Church. Five hundred years before that was the Great Schism where the eastern and western churches split. And five hundred years before that the church was shifting out of the dark ages into the middle ages. We once again are at a crucial time.

And here is the one thing I do know: We will survive. The church will live. I know that because I know God. And though God may seem to sleep for a night, God always comes through in the morning. Though the church might seem bound for death. Though church seats might empty, though every church might sell its building and move into schools and shopping centers, though budgets might be squeezed, the church will not die. The church will not die. Because God makes a way for the church. God brings the church through. God takes barrenness, and turns it into *miracle*.

But we like Sarai have a temptation. We don't have any longer the social and financial resources that we had in the fifties. Things have changed.

With this pressure, we are easily tempted to take things into our own hands. We have to trust the God who is faithful.

What is left for us, then, is not to try to take things into our own hands. What's left up to us then, is to listen to God's word and be faithful. And not try to steal other church's members and call that church growth—because it's not. And not try to badmouth the church across the street because their music or theology is different from us. And not try to substitute our solutions to God's problems. Because God is at work.

No matter what these years bring, we know this:  
the church will live. It might look very different  
than the church of the last five hundred years,  
but it will live. God will not abandon the church.

God is the God of Sarai. And Jacob. And Isaac.  
And Judah. And David. And Tamar. And Mary.  
And Jesus Christ.

So what does it take to survive this life? It takes  
the God who opens wombs, who gives life, who  
preserves us till the end. Amen.