

**“A Dated View of Women?”**  
**Genesis 18:1–10; Luke 10:38–42**  
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I will never forget the day a waitress I knew well at a diner near the church I served in Richmond, Virginia looked at me with a smirk and said, “Well, I guess you’ve heard the news.” “No,” I said, to which she replied, “I’m pregnant.” I laughed because she was in her fifties. Her oldest child was over thirty and she had grandchildren in elementary school. She had to be kidding... “Go ahead and laugh,” she said, “Everyone but me thinks it’s funny.”

As it turned out, she was not kidding. It ended up being a front-page story in the Richmond Times-Dispatch — “Grandmother Becomes Mother Again!” She did fine with the birth, loved the child, and only missed two weeks of work, but she never found the experience to be anything but a challenge, understandably so. There is a long list of reasons why we have children when we are young or relatively young. Having a child very late in life is no laughing matter.

Abraham’s wife Sarah would agree, though she does eventually laugh, I suspect in derision. In our reading from Genesis, she is off-stage most of the time, as Abraham welcomes three visitors who represent God, hears the good news that Sarah will have a child, and thus claims the promise God has made that they will give rise to a great nation through whom all people will be blessed.

At the very end of the story, we are told that Sarah is listening at the tent entrance. So, she knows what is going to happen, but it seems odd that she only overhears by accident. Why isn’t she told first? She is the one who will do all the work, and at the tender age of ninety!

It is no laughing matter. On one level, it is great news. The divine promise is fulfilled, a nation will be born, and Sarah will be vindicated. In this time, a woman’s value is based on her ability to bear children. And this is further evidence that for God nothing is impossible. But for Sarah, this is not a simple case of straightforward good news.

“Cheers to Abraham and bully for God!” Sarah must think to herself, “But I am the one who is going to give birth to this child, in the tenth decade of life!” It is precarious enough in this time for a young woman to give birth. For a woman her age, it is pure madness!

But the truth is she is treated like little more than an incubator all along. As we have noted, women are valued almost solely by their ability to bear children. She is only accidentally present, and in a hidden way, when Abraham is told about the pregnancy. And she will be scolded for laughing. Women, Sarah included, are not equal partners in this time, and this is seen even before the announcement of a holy birth.

The story begins with Abraham meeting three visitors. He welcomes them graciously in keeping with Middle Eastern standards for hospitality, offering them water to wash up, a place to rest, and fine food. Like Martha looking after Jesus’ needs in the reading from Luke, Abraham is the ideal host. But who does the work here? Not Abraham. Sarah makes the cakes and a servant prepares the meat. Abraham just talks to the guests and gives orders.

Sarah is just a good little woman, barely on stage, but doing all the work, and so, being a dependable incubator for her man’s child is just one more responsibility to fulfill. What a dated view of women! “The God of Abraham praise,” we sing. We ought to sing praise to the God of Sarah. It would fit the meter better and restore credit long past due.

But before we become too critical of ancient Middle Eastern culture and thus be tempted to ignore such ancient texts, we might want to consider how we view women in enlightened twenty-first century America. When I listen to much of the debate on abortion, it sounds like many people today view women as little more than incubators.

I have never preached a sermon on abortion because it is a complex and deeply personal issue that is better considered in a dialogical context where we can talk with one another and be sensitive to who is present for the conversation. And I don’t plan to preach on this subject today. But there are layers of public conversation that need some input from a faith perspective, especially since faith is referenced frequently by those who have wanted the changes that are taking place.

It is true that the word “abortion” is not in the constitution, but nor is it in the Bible. So, all faith positions on this subject have to be acknowledged as being the product of human effort based on the interpretation of scripture and the assessment of medical, psychological and economic information. In other words, this is not a simple subject with a singular answer for people of faith. In fact, while I would hope we all want to affirm the sacredness of life, all life, the church has taken many different stances on exactly when human life begins.

In Judaism, the dominant view is that personhood begins at birth, largely because in Exodus 21:22, when an argument ends in the death of a fetus, the prescribed punishment is only a fine. Saint Augustine in the fourth century said that the soul does not enter the fetus until forty to ninety days after conception. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century agreed with Augustine and said that the abortion of a non-ensouled fetus is not murder. Pope Innocent III said the soul enters when the mother first feels movement. Pope Gregory XIV in 1591 said ensoulment takes place at 116 days or during the sixteenth week. It was not until 1869 that Pope Pius IX said ensoulment takes place at conception, this view was canonized in 1917, and this remains the Catholic position to this day (*Jesus Was a Liberal*, Scotty McLennan, pp. 17–19).

All of this is to say that the question of when an embryo or fetus becomes a human being — a huge consideration for all debates on this issue — has not been settled, as many people seem to assume. All parties involved from a faith perspective treat the unborn with deep respect. This fragile form of life that we all held at some point is sacred. But is the mother’s life not sacred too? Does her health not matter, especially when the viability of a pregnancy is in question? And in extreme instances of rape and incest, especially if no one is sure when the fetus becomes a human being, does the mother’s emotional wellbeing not weigh into decisions? Not if she is just an incubator.

But the current narrative about abortion is not the only indicator of our low view of women. In a recent State of Women in Baptist Life Report published by Baptist Women in Ministry, the 555 respondents have good things to say, many serve in supportive churches. But 59% of these women in ministry have been overlooked and silenced at meetings,

21% were asked inappropriate questions in interviews, 49% are paid less than male counterparts, 46% of white women have been accused of being bossy or controlling while 65% of women of color have, and 25% have been sexually harassed or assaulted in their ministry settings.

It is disturbing to realize women still struggle this much, in the church, and our part of it. It should come as no surprise that women are still objectified and devalued in the broader culture. It may be tempting to view a story like the one we have read from Genesis as dated and irrelevant. Sadly, it is not.

So, where is the good news today? Where do we find hope? Partly in humor that is shaped by a different perspective. In response to opposition to female ministers, someone came up with a tongue-in-cheek list of ten reasons why men should not be ordained. I won't list all of these, but here are a few.

“A man's place is in the army... The physique of men indicates that they are more suited to such tasks as chopping down trees and wrestling mountain lions. It would be ‘unnatural’ for them to do ministerial tasks... Men are too emotional to be priests or pastors. Their conduct at football and basketball games demonstrates this... Some men are handsome, and this will distract women worshipers... Men are prone to violence... Jesus was betrayed by a man. His lack of faith and ensuing punishment remind us of the subordinated position all men should take... Men can still be involved in church activities, even without being ordained. They can sweep sidewalks, repair the church roof, and perhaps even lead the singing on Father's Day...(*Christian Ethics Today*, Spring, 2012, Eugene Cho, p. 15).

Humor can help and point in an indirect way to a broader view, but even greater help is found in the ministry of Jesus, including what we see in the reading from Luke. Now I would like to avoid having any rotten fruit thrown at me by the Marthas in the congregation. So let me say up-front that I have no explanation for why Jesus dismisses the validity of Martha's service from which he benefits. I have read some attempts at an explanation, none of which I find compelling, and Jesus clearly values service, as he values Martha. He loves this family dearly.

But what he affirms Mary for, sitting at his feet and listening, is highly unusual. This is not an idle conversation. “Sitting at his feet” is a technical term for studying under a rabbi. In Acts 22:3, the Apostle Paul says he was “brought up in Tarsus at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to... ancestral law...” This means Gamaliel was Paul’s teacher. Jesus is Mary’s teacher, which may seem ordinary, but it is not. Women do not study at the feet of a rabbi in this time. The established view is very much like that of Reverend Nathan Price in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. He says that trying to educate women is like pouring water into shoes. It doesn’t hold.

Jesus disagrees, and not just here. Again and again, he welcomes women into his inner circle. He talks to women he is not supposed to, like the woman at the well who becomes a witness to his ministry. He treats Mary as a worthy student. In return, women are the last at the cross and the first at the empty tomb. Women teach and preach and serve as deacons in the early church. But something happens along the way. It is not an act of the Spirit. It is a concession to cultural norms. Women are pushed back into subservient roles, texts are altered, and the good old boys take charge again, much to the detriment of the church.

But it doesn’t have to be this way, and isn’t in settings like ours. Women are valued as equal partners. And to be clear, this is not a new idea driven by a secular agenda. It is an old idea embodied by Jesus, and in fact, not only by Jesus and Christian faith. While Sarah is viewed as an incubator, there are powerful female leaders in Jewish tradition — female judges, clan leaders, prophets. In Reform Judaism today, most rabbis are female, such that people have come to wonder where the men are. It is a question many churches ask because while men have been largely absent, women have done most of the work, even in fundamentalist churches that exclude women from leadership. Where would the church be without women? Would there even be a church?

The view of women found in Genesis 18 may seem dated, but our view isn’t all that forward-thinking. After all these years, we are still trying to catch up to Jesus. May God forgive us for being so slow, and may God help us to do a better job of living up to our calling.