

The Light in Sarah's Tent – Genesis 24

The old rabbis say that while Sarah lived, a mysterious light burned continually in her tent.
And that when she died, the light went out
Then -when Rebekah entered that tent
They say the light began to shine once more.

I like that story.

I like *this* story.

It speaks of great truth, and I believe it honours the mystery of the ways of God in human life.

Sarah had a remarkable life. I like to imagine, with those rabbis, that when she went to her tent each night, the light was there, burning for her.

It burned the first night they left their homeland...

Can you imagine how that must have been? Both of them elderly, called to leave everything they knew behind, setting out with only a crazy promise for the future. It must have been one thing to think about it in the abstract, making the plans when the trip was a long way off, but then when it got down to actually packing, loading up the animals, waving goodbye to your family and knowing that you'll never see this place again...that's different, isn't it? Even as I think about it now, I can feel that in my gut.

What did that feel like for her – what were her thoughts, impressions, feelings, that first day on the road, when the reality of what they had left behind finally began to sink in? Did she feel it in her stomach, that slightly sick feeling of unreality...She must have been afraid, she's tired, she's sad and homesick and ...she goes into her tent as the desert night gets colder and colder...

And the light is waiting there for her, burning.

Later on, their journey takes them to Egypt. Abraham, afraid of the Pharaoh, says that Sarah is not his wife, but his sister. This is supposed to protect them. Under this misunderstanding, Sarah is taken to the house of the Pharaoh. The Bible is curiously silent about what happens there, but ...it isn't hard to imagine. Or maybe it is. In any case, Pharaoh eventually discovers the truth, and "gives her back." What was THAT like for her? When she was in the Pharaoh's chamber, was the light there? How long was she there? We just don't know. But when she returned, and went to her own tent, - I imagine (this is just me now with my 20th century mind) I imagine that the only thing she wanted was a shower, and a fresh nightgown, and her own bed. And as she went into her own tent, there it was. The light was burning, waiting for her there.

Month after month she waited, and month after month the pain in her abdomen would return, signal that once again she had not conceived. She was sure, through the pain, both kinds, that God's promise would come true. You know what happened with Hagar; it was Sarah's own idea – that perhaps she was to cooperate with God in this way and make sure that there would be children in some other way. It was Sarah's own idea...but that night, after she had given Hagar to her husband, and Abraham had gone into Hagar's tent and Sarah went alone to her own.... Even then the light shone.

When she heard the strangers' promise that Sarah herself would conceive, she laughed so hard and so long; doubled right over, one half of her meeting the other half in a snorting, howling chorus of disbelief and praise.. Tears blurred her vision, she kept wiping her eyes and the tears kept coming, and the light, through those tears, splintered into a shower of thousands of stars. . Stars everywhere – that's how the light looked as she laughed and cried and sought it through the tears that ran down her wrinkled, weathered face. She laughed until her stomach ached...and the light burned.

Nine months later, in her tent, during the hours of labour on the birthing stool, she thought that her 90 year old body would be ripped apart with the effort of giving birth...
As her abdomen did what women's abdomens do, to give another life
And the women of the tribe bathed her forehead and massaged her belly, they whispered encouraging words even as the looks they gave each other belied their confidence
And when she gave the final mighty push and her body ripped and moments later she heard the cry of the baby – *her* baby –
And that night, when she lay him on her belly, still flabby and stretched, and as she nursed him – *nursed him!* with breasts that sagged and drooped and that no one in their right mind would ever imagine could nourish any life at all...as she held him just the two of them alone at last...
The light burned.

After she had Abraham send Hagar away – did she feel guilty? When she went to bed that night, knowing that Hagar and her son had been banished from the camp, perhaps to die in the desert (*or... did she see it as giving Hagar her freedom? Was it in the end a complicated act of kindness as well?*) but that night, what did she feel, there in her tent? What did she think about as she drifted off to sleep? Did she look at the light as it burned? Did she imagine it burning for Hagar too?

And then that horrible day when Abraham took their son – Isaac was 12 – took him and wouldn't tell her where they were going. She was uneasy – something was wrong. When they got back that night, Abraham so excited that he burst into her tent, picked her up and spun her around, the firelight in the tent making strange and distorted shadows on the walls of her tent as they whirled around...what was happening?

THEN she found out, from his disjointed account, that his excitement was because he had been going to sacrifice Isaac by plunging a knife into him and then burning him as a sacrifice, but a ram appeared instead...WHAT???? He was going to do WHAT??

When she finally went to bed that night, into her tent, that was the first time she ever REALLY| believed that maybe Abraham was wrong. Maybe the promise was just their imagination and maybe they were old and senile and foolish just as most people told them they were. She went to bed, sick to her stomach. The light was very dim that night, as she lay on her mat in the gathering darkness

But the light still burned.

The only thing more we hear about Sarah is that she died at 127, and that Abraham buried her in a cave in Hittite land

And that the rabbis say that then, the light went out.

Gen 24: 24 to the end

And the light, they say, began to burn again.

Life – its rhythms, its surprises, its twists and turns ...
Life is very mysterious. Deep. Holy.

Your life is not Sarah's. We are separated from her by thousands of years, by culture, language, world view and assumptions about reality. There's a way in which we can never understand this character.

But we CAN understand the light that burned in her tent through it all
Because that same light burns in yours

I don't know all the nights you went to whatever room you slept in
And lay there, wondering – thinking – reviewing the day, feeling the feelings or just numb from what life can sometimes offer
But at those times
The light was burning.
Whether or not you could see it, it shone. I know it shone.

I know something else too
That there was someone before you
Maybe you weren't even aware of this person
But there has been someone in your life, someone whose light went out
And YOU are the one who made it shine again.
You were the one who carried on.

The light in that tent shone again when Rebekah entered.
Whose tent have you entered? Whose legacy are you continuing? Who can rest more easily and let their own light go out gently because they know you will carry on?

Who are the Sarahs to your Rebekah? The ones to whom you feel a connection, who came before you?
You may never have met them
Rebekah never met Sarah
And Sarah had no way of knowing she would come along the way she did
But the Light knew
And the Light knows
That when it's your turn to be Sarah
And your light grows dim and then goes out
There will be a Rebekah to carry on and rekindle the flame.

Some of the most vital work we do as church is to cultivate the young people among us. Clear the way, create the space, chop the kindling as it were, so that they can rekindle the flame in their own ways. From us, they can learn what the flame has meant for us, and discover what it can mean for them. Find it in their own lives, in their own beings.

So that when it's time for them to step into the tent
There will be no question about the flame or its keeper

They say there's a keeper for every flame.
They say too that a flame burned continuously in Sarah's tent, that it died when she died and
when Rebekah stepped in it was rekindled.
You are Sarah
You are Rebekah
And you are the keeper of a Holy flame.

In the darkness of your tent, when you feel the pain in your stomach of a promise yet unfulfilled,
or the birthing of something new and frightening, or the sickness in your gut at the memory of a
betrayal, or the aching of your belly as you laugh with delight at the outrageous and delightful
ways of God
May you seek the light through the tears of laughter or of pain
Let the light split the night and shatter into a million stars
And may you know the promise is true.
May you be opened to the mystery of these things
Amen