Benediction: Gracious God, thank you for continually renewing your covenant within me. Amen

I used to walk home from elementary school every day with my friend Kathy who lived a few doors down. My parents both worked outside the home so instead of actually going home, I would go to the home of an elderly maiden lady who lived next door, named Mrs. Givler. The route from my school was straightforward. You walked east about three blocks and then turned right and walked a block. The first two blocks of the walk had neat rows of bungalow-style houses on each side of street; the last block before the right turn was lightly wooded. The block after the turn was my block – another block with rows of houses.

One day, Kathy and I decided to take a shortcut home. We would walk the usual two blocks east alongside the houses, but then we would go through the woods, which we thought would then enable us to approach her house and Mrs. Givler’s house from behind. We thought it would be quicker and more interesting than doing the usual last two blocks.

Well, as you may well have guessed this shortcut didn’t work out as we planned. Despite what our elementary school logic told us, we weren’t able to navigate the woods in such a way as to find the right houses. So we went through the woods and then, when we couldn’t find our houses, we had to backtrack and ended up ultimately taking the usual route home. But, of course, after this “shortcut,” I was late arriving at Mrs. Givler’s and Mrs. Givler was worried and not too pleased with me. In trying to take a shortcut, I’d complicated the journey. I’d messed up.

Abram and Sarai, who are the main characters in our Old Testament story today, also took what to them must have seemed a logical shortcut in their faith journey with God. Many years before, when they were young adults, God had made a covenant with Abram in which God told him to leave his current home and travel to a foreign land and to worship God. In exchange, God would make Abram the father of a nation and Abram would have as many descendants as the stars in the heavens. Abram, in faith, made the journey to the new land and worshipped God. But the years dragged on and on and Abram and Sarai did not have any children. So, when Abram is 86 and Sarai is 76, the couple believes the window for having children is passing. In keeping with the custom of the day of childless women, Sarai offers her maid servant Hagar to Abram and Hagar gives birth to Abram’s son, Ishmael. But after she has her son, Hagar begins to act up, showing contempt for her former mistress. After 13 years of less than domestic tranquility, Sarai punishes Hagar so severely that she runs away, taking the son Ishmael with her.

Abraham and Sarah had taken a shortcut and it had not worked out as they thought it would. Genesis tells us, in the chapters just before our lection, that God intended for the child of promise to be the son of Abram and Sarai. The couple had gotten impatient in waiting for God and taken the matter into their own hands. Now they had to backtrack.

Now God probably wasn’t pleased, but instead of abandoning Abram and Sarai and giving the promised reward to someone more faithful, God guides the events of Abram and Sarai’s life over those 13 years of feeling the consequences of their shortcut. God helps their faith to grow through this time,[[1]](#endnote-1) just like God helps our faith to grow in times of conflict or other consequences that may come about because of our own shortcuts. And then, when the time is right, God renews covenant with them, as we see in the lection today. As God renews this covenant, God gives them new names, Abraham and Sarah, that demonstrate their status as the father and mother of a nation. In the 13 years of struggling with the consequences of their shortcut, God had transformed them so that they were very different people and now ready to fulfill that promise. We know that soon after this, Sarah bears a child to Abraham and they name him Isaac.

According to Walter Brueggemann, one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of our time, the story of the lives of Abraham and Sarah is the story of hopeful but impatient groaning as they wait for the redemption of their bodies and of their history.[[2]](#endnote-2)

For many of us, our lives also reflect hopeful but impatient groaning as we wait to receive all the good things that God has promised us. The challenge is always to wait on God, to try to move in sync with God, to take every action in God’s time and led by God. Sometimes we rise to the challenge and we move with God. Other times, we become impatient and we want to try a shortcut. We mean well, but, the shortcut doesn’t go as planned and the situation becomes all messed up. God doesn’t abandon us and go off in search of someone more patient. God works with us and in us as we experience the consequences of these shortcuts. And then, at the right time, God renews that covenant with us. When that happens we move forward with God as new people, with a new identity, stronger in our faith, ready to change the world in God’s name.

Amen

1. Hughes, R. K. (2004). [*Genesis: beginning and blessing*](https://ref.ly/logosres/prwdgen?ref=Bible.Ge17.1-27&off=1250) (p. 245). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brueggemann, W. (1982). [*Genesis*](https://ref.ly/logosres/wjkintot-ge?ref=Bible.Ge16.1-18.15&off=1195&ctx=hor%E2%80%99s+translation).+~These+first+parents+) (p. 151). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)