

## Six Words

*Genesis 17:1-7, 15-19a*

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Could you tell a story in six words?

While having dinner with other writers of the famed Algonquin Round Table in New York City, Earnest Hemingway's story-telling abilities were put to the test: could he tell a story in just six words?

Because of that challenge, six-word writing contests have proliferated across the writing world. These days, universities, writing magazines, newspapers, and even local libraries host six-word writing competitions. Here are a few of my favorite entries:

Python eats porcupine. Regrets it later.

Convicted hacker escapes using hidden file. (*Get it?*)

"Hmm, that's new," the doctor said.

Only child, but never the favorite.

My headstone was a participation trophy.

On that fateful day when they bet Hemingway that he could not write a story in just six words, he bet he could. So he grabbed a pen and a napkin, and on it he scribbled these six words: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

How do you read that little story? What's your interpretation?

Some of us can probably imagine finding those six words in the classifieds section of the local newspaper. "Silly person bought shoes for their baby. Everybody knows how quickly babies grow. Probably shoved that little shoebox to the back of their closet and forgot all about it until it was already too late."

Some of us read those words, but instead of imagining it in the classifieds section, we imagine it on Facebook Marketplace or Craig's List accompanied, of course, by an unflattering photo of the shoes. "They were probably a gift given by some well-meaning person at the baby shower, but the parents thought they were ugly... or silly... or useless for a baby that is literally carried everywhere it goes. And so, rather than regifting them at the next baby shower, they're now selling them in hopes of getting a couple extra bucks for diapers."

Maybe that's what some of us imagine... but that's not how I read it.

What if, like Christen and I, you were intimately acquainted with the pokes, the prods, the awkward examinations and conversations, the pills, the injections, the weekly blood draws, the ultrasounds, the diets, and the monthly discouragements of infertility?

Ten or so years ago, Christen and I paid our dues to enter into the fellowship of those who have tried and tried and tried... and not succeeded. Our membership is still valid, in case you were wondering. We have had every conceivable test. We have taken every pill and supplement medicine has to offer. We have even resorted to remedies like acupuncture. And, in a grand, final attempt, we took out a significant loan to give In Vitro Fertilization a try. I, for one, am not a betting man. I can't even put a single quarter in one of those slot machines in Vegas, but this was one bet I was willing to take. After 4+ years, we paid off the loan just last month.

Over the course of these ten years, we have heard a heartbeat two times. Two children for whom I went shoe-shopping in my mind. But both times those dreams died with the deafening silence of the next ultrasound.

I want you to listen to Hemingway's six-word story again, but this time with mine and Christen's story in mind:

"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

How long ago had Sarah stitched those baby shoes in anticipation of God's promise?

How long had she been carrying them in her satchel, hugging them close to her womb?

In her better moments, had she ever considered giving them to Hagar for baby Ishmael?

The first time God came to Abram and issued a promise to him, Abram was 75 years old and Sarai was 66 — already well past her prime biological birthing years.

God showed up and said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1-3).

To Abram's great credit, he did as God had said.

If we were to try and write this part of the story in only six words, we might say: "Abram leaves for God knows where."

Well, the years past, but still no baby. God showed up again, this time in the middle of the night. God said, "Don't be afraid, Abram... your reward will be great" (Gen. 15:1).

Abram didn't pull any punches: "You said that last time, and I still don't have any children" (Gen. 15:2-3, paraphrase).

The LORD took Abram outside and bid him to look up at the clear night sky. "Count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be," said the LORD (Gen. 15:5).

Abram, for his part, "*believed* the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

That word that is translated as "believe" is actually the Hebrew word *a-men* — as in how we close our prayers: Amen. It doesn't mean "believe." It means *trust*. There's a world of difference between *belief* and *trust*. I *believe* that the roller coaster at Elych Garden's is made of wood, but that doesn't mean I *trust* it with my life! That's what we're saying when we say "Amen." We're closing our prayer with a confession of trust. Abram *trusted* God.

The six-word version for this part? "More numerous than the stars. Amen."

But, again, years passed, and, again, still no baby. Discouragement took root in Sarai's heart. She was now 78 years old and Abram 87, and still they had no child. Those baby shoes she had stitched were now just a harsh reminder of what she'd always desired but never got. So she took matters into her own hands. She sent Abram into her maidservant, Hagar, to try and have a child.

I mean, what could go wrong?

Wouldn't you know it, Sarai got exactly what she *did not* want. After her 78 years of infertility, Hagar bore Abram a son on the first try — and the whole thing went south hurting every person around Sarai.

If we were to tell this part in six words, it might go:

[Slide #28] "Her plan backfired, wounding every bystander."

You have to feel for Sarai. Where was God in all of this? And what about that promise God had made 25 years earlier? They had done everything God had asked. Were they perfect? No. But who is? So why hadn't God kept God's promise?

Which begs the question: what do we do when *we* feel like Sarai? What do we do when we think God's promises have gone unfulfilled in our lives?

Do we lose hope? Lose faith? Feel tempted to throw in the towel? Do we, like Sarai, try to take matters into our own hands?

Maybe what we ought to be asking is: How can we be so certain that God has failed us?

Maybe God is more interested in giving us what we *need* than merely what we *want*.

James Howell tells the story of what he says was one of the best gifts he was ever given. It was in the last days of his pastorate at a beloved church, and the congregation's lay leader shuffled into his office. He says:

"Nobody had bothered to voted James Alexander in as lay leader; he just *was* the leader of the laity... James was 89, but he seemed as if he had centuries on him. Wise, solid, very southern, with a gravely voice... he wore overalls in a pretty dressy community. Those of us who knew James were awestruck by this man's holiness — it was not that smug, sanitized kind of holiness, but an earthy, calloused, believable holiness...

'I couldn't decide what to give you, now that you're leaving,' he said, but as he did, he reached deep into his denim pocket, pulled out something and gradually opened his crusty hand. It was his pocketknife, worn from decades of going everywhere with him..."

Howell notes that if you were to ask him to make a list of 500 things he might vaguely hope to possess one day, a pocketknife would never have made that list. He says:

"But then James added some words. 'Carry that around with you in your pocket. Then some day, when you're having a bad day, feel it down in there and remember that somebody loves you.'"

As he reflected on that gift, Howell says, "I didn't want a knife, but then I didn't *not* want a knife either... but then again, the gifts God gives are things that we generally never thought of wanting."

He says that more often than giving us what we *think* we want, God gives us what *God* wants us to have. That's the fallacy of American consumerism, isn't it? We think we want a gift card so that we can get whatever we want, but God isn't so ineffectual to give us merely what we crave. Instead, God gives us something infinitely richer ("Best gift: What God wants us to have," *The Christian Century*, December 13, 2006).

Maybe the promises of God are less about what we want, and more about what *God* wants to give to us... if we are open to receiving them.

The *third* time God appeared to Abram, Abram was now 99 years old. Sarai was 90 years old, and by now had surely gotten rid of those baby shoes. By now *she* was the one who had taken out an ad in the classifieds that read: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

When the God appeared to Abram this third time, God once again renewed the promise attaching to it words like “exceedingly numerous” and “a multitude of nations” and “exceedingly fruitful.”

Yeah, yeah, yeah... we’ve heard it all before, God.

But this time God did something different. God sealed the covenant by changing Abram’s name from Abram to *Abraham* – meaning “father of multitudes.”

And then God changed Sarai’s name, too: “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but *Sarah*... I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her... and she shall give rise to nations; kings of people’s shall come from her” (Gen. 17: 15-16).

Abram to Abraham... Sarai to Sarah... Before this moment, Sarah had never once been explicitly mentioned in the promise of God – not before they left the safety of their families and not when Abraham looked up and saw all of those stars.

But when God renews the promise this time, God mentions Sarah by name and says, “I will bless *her*... and I will give you a son by *her*.”

And, old Abraham, for his part, can’t help but laugh at the proposition. In fact, he falls on his face in laughter at the very idea of a child being born to a hundred-year old man and a ninety-year old woman. Instead, he suggested a compromise to God: “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!”

It was Abraham’s way of saying to God, “I already have a son. I don’t particularly want to have another one. Can’t you just let the blessing fall to Ishmael?”

But God refused. To be clear, the problem was *not* Ishmael. The problem was simply that Ishmael was not *Sarah’s* son. You see, God’s promise wasn’t just for Abraham.

And that’s the thing: God’s promise had *never* been just for Abraham. It had always and forever been a promise that was meant to bless others *through* Abraham. Way back in Genesis 12, God said, “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that *you* will be a blessing.”

And the first person meant to be blessed by extension of their connection to Abraham was always Sarah. It was never simply about progeny, but about the way that the blessing was always intended *to be shared*.

Sometimes we have to be open to receiving the the gifts God wants to give us, and not just the ones we think we want – because the things God wants to give us are never for our benefit alone. They are gifts intended to bless others through us.

So God says, "No... no, Abraham, we can't just substitute Ishmael in lieu of the promise. Because my promise will not, cannot, must not bypass or exclude Sarah."

This is how God works. You are blessed, so that you might be a blessing. If the world will know God's redemption, it will be because we are willing to share it. What God has given us was never meant to be kept, but always to be given away.

Earnest Hemingway considered his six-word story to be his best work, and you can see why. It speaks on so many levels. Comedy. Tragedy. Mystery. Open-ended.

"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Thank God, that those six words weren't the final words of Abraham and Sarah's story. Soon enough, Sarah would be taking out a new ad in the classifieds. Six short words: "Looking for: baby shoes, never worn."

And if God can do that with a couple who had one foot in the grave and one foot in the maternity ward, imagine what God might want to do through you.

Amen.