

Sermon – Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7 September 15, 2019, Crossroads UCC

Today's events are pretty well known: God and a couple of attendants – angels – come to visit Abraham, who shows them elaborate and generous hospitality. They, in return, tell him that he and his wife, Sarah, will have a son before the year passes. Since Abraham is roughly 100 and Sarah is about 90, this sounds like nonsense, and Sarah, who is listening from inside a tent, laughs to herself about it. The visitor knows she laughed and called her on it, with the rebuke “Is anything too wonderful for God?” Before the year is over, Sarah does, indeed, have a son, whom they name Isaac, which means “he laughs”.

Then, though it is not in today's reading, from Isaac will come Jacob, from whom will come Joseph, who will save the Hebrew people from starvation but will get them enslaved, from which condition they will be rescued by Moses, who will lead the Exodus and get the Ten Commandments (I wish I had a backdrop of the Cecil B. DeMille movie running behind me here) and so on, and so forth, through all the Sunday School lessons of the Old Testament, then to Jesus, and on to us.

So this passage is one of the introductions to something pretty important. And there are a couple of, frankly, pretty obvious directions to go with this: the idea of **hospitality** (rather important these days) or the “is anything too wonderful for God” message. But I didn't want to go with either of those, for various vague and ill-defined reasons. They weren't working for me this week. So, as I decided what to say today, I had to step back a little bit and look at the events, passages, and stories surrounding this piece.

OK, some recap – really a crash course on Abraham. After most of the earth and people are destroyed by the flood, Noah's descendants fan out over the earth and populate it. One of these eventual descendants is a man named Abram, who is living in Haran with his father, Terah, his nephew Lot, his wife Sarai (who is barren), and various household members. God speaks to Abram, telling him to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house to go to a land God will show him. God will then make Abram the beginning of a great and lasting nation. There is no reason given for God to approach Abram – but God does, and Abram obeys. He loads up his wife, his nephew, and all their possessions and people and heads out to Canaan. Periodically God tells Abram the land they are on will be given to his offspring and Abram builds an altar.

Then there is a famine and the group goes to Egypt where there seems to have been food. Before they get there, Abram says to his wife Sarai, “you are really beautiful and if someone powerful wants you and knows I'm your husband they will kill me to get you. So tell people you're my sister. That way it may go well with me because of you and my life may be spared on your account.” Well, the Egyptians see she is beautiful and take her to Pharaoh. Pharaoh is smitten and gives Abram all sorts of livestock and slaves in gratitude. But God protects Sarai by inflicting Pharaoh and his household with great plagues. Somehow Pharaoh finds out or figures out that this is because Sarai is Abram's wife, not his sister and Pharaoh gives Sarai back, asking

“Why did you not tell me she was your wife?” And they send Abram, very rich now, on his way back, with Sarai and Lot and all the stuff he’s gotten from them.

By the way, in case anyone has missed it, “use your beautiful wife to bilk an unsuspecting rich guy out of his money” has been a plot device in any number of books and movies . . . and the one doing so is never the hero. Just sayin’.

Anyway, Abram and Lot separate, because they are too rich for the same territory to support all of them. Lot’s new region has all sorts of war problems and Lot is taken prisoner, but Abram goes to the rescue and wins all sort of renown and allies.

But Abram still doesn’t have a son to inherit all this. He points that out to God, who tells him it’s going to happen.

Sarai gets the idea that she’ll give her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to Abram to bear his son. But when Hagar gets pregnant Sarai realizes she doesn’t really like this idea, and, with Abram’s permission, mistreats Hagar. Hagar runs away, but an angel of God goes to her and sends her back, with the promise that her son will be the beginning of a great family of descendants. So Hagar returns and gives birth to Ishmael.

Again, God talks to Abram, telling him his name will now be Abraham and Sarai’s will be Sarah, and reasserting that Sarah will bear him a son. Abraham laughs, but God tells him it will happen – and that Ishmael will also be the father of a great nation.

All this leads up to the first part of today’s passage. But wait! There’s more. After God and the angels finish talking with Abraham and Sarah they destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, saving Lot and his daughters and no one else.

Abraham and Sarah move into Gerar and we have another “pretend you are my sister” episode, which gets Abraham lots more riches. **Then** we have the second part of today’s scriptures, in which Isaac is born. Yay, yay, hurrah, hurrah. Lots of laughter and rejoicing.

But because Sarah is still jealous of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham sends them away. They almost die in the wilderness, but the angel comes back and saves them. Eventually Ishmael grows up and marries and has many descendants, one of whom is Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

Then Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Isaac, and so on – for more information, see the book of Genesis.

Whew.

What strikes me, as I go through all of this, is that Abraham isn’t a particularly good person. I’ve mentioned before about the wife-as-sister-to-make-money thing; the best you can say about Abraham in these episodes is that he’s pretty cowardly. The worst is that he is, essentially, prostituting his wife for his own enrichment. He seems to have no loyalty to Sarah and isn’t

willing to risk anything to protect her. It's even more disturbing since in both cases the man who takes Sarah says "Why didn't you say she was your wife?", with the implication that, had they known, they'd have left her alone. Both kings seem horrified at what they almost do.

Abraham doesn't do anything to protect Hagar from Sarah when Hagar is pregnant with his child. He feels bad (about Ishmael) when Sarah demands he send Hagar and Ishmael away, but when God says that Ishmael will also be the father of a great nation, Abraham goes along with it.

I'm really not all that impressed with Abraham!

But I am willing to give Abraham credit for listening to God and obeying God, even when God asks something hard. Abraham goes when God says "go". Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac when God tells him to. Abraham hears God when God speaks. Abraham obeys. His judgement is bad about a lot of things and God has to get him out of difficulties, but he listens and he obeys.

But it's interesting to think about the fact that, at the start, there is no real reason for God to choose Abram over, say Ophir, another descendant of Noah's son Shem, at least no reason that we know, no reason important enough to be recorded. And I wonder if perhaps God did not *choose Abram*, in the sense that God chose Abram and only Abram to begin this dynasty. Perhaps God spoke to many people and Abram was the only one who listened and who obeyed. Abram, with all his flaws of greed and cowardice, was willing to take God at God's word, to listen and to obey. (Perhaps his greed was more of a factor than we like think – God's promises to him are pretty cool.) His greed and cowardice caused problems – God had to intervene, twice, to save Sarah when the destined line was nearly lost and God had to help Hagar twice as well – but God stuck with him. And Abraham stuck with God.

A time-honored aphorism is that history is written by the victors. It's not strictly true, by the way, or we wouldn't have statues of Confederate generals to take down, but **is** true that the Biblical scriptures are a picture of things that may have happened, told to support a definite vision of the world. We don't know what has been left out. I remember once railing about Rebekah, wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob and Esau. I had – still do – a real problem with her blatant and extreme favoritism for greedy Jacob. Helping one child cheat the other one doesn't seem *motherly* to me. I was talking with my sister who reminded me that we don't know what God was saying to Rebekah throughout that time. I think about that a lot when I'm thinking about the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and it really struck me as I thought about this passage for this sermon. We **don't** usually know what God is saying to other people in the story.

God actually talks, directly or via angels, to more people than just Abraham in this part of Genesis. Angels instruct Lot on leaving Sodom. An angel speaks twice to Hagar in the desert. And God speaks to Sarah in this passage. When Sarah is frightened to admit that she laughed at the idea that she would bear a child, God shows her that God knows. There is a moment of connection there – God is speaking directly to Sarah. She is not getting God's words secondhand through Abraham, who has proved somewhat untrustworthy at times. God is speaking to **her**. It is a simple sentence: "Oh, yes, you did laugh," but it tells Sarah that God knows her. God cares enough about her to speak to her. It is Sarah's story, as well as Abraham's.

The tellers, then writers, of Genesis were telling the special story of a special people. They provided, as much as they could, a clear narrative with certain themes. One of these was the theme of the God-chosen and God-led leader, the special man God entrusts with the dynasty. It's a good theme.

But let's be honest: if you were God, would you put all your eggs in a Abraham-shaped basket? Would you say "the single person to whom I will entrust a whole people and a whole faith, at its onset, is this fairly cowardly, somewhat greed guy with a barren wife and no kids"?

I think God reached out to many people – including Sarah, including Hagar. I think God called and called and called, to see who answered. We have, in our Bible, the stories of some of those who heard and answered and obeyed. But I suspect there were more.

God never stopped calling. God calls now. God may be calling us.

But there is a problem, and the stories of Abraham illustrate it. Even when God's calling is clear, even when we know we are hearing God, we can get it, or parts of it, wrong. Does anyone really believe God wanted Abraham to claim his wife as his sister in order to keep himself safe and make himself richer? Of course not! Abraham's own self – his personality, his history, his fears, and his hopes colored and shaped what he believed God wanted.

I believe this is what happened time and again in the story of God's people. Patriarchs and Matriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, leaders – they heard God's voice, they tried to obey and thought they were doing so, but their own lives and stories got in their way. Did the same God who later told us to love our enemies really want the total destruction of Amalek – or did the prophet Samuel want their destruction? This twisting, I think, is why God ultimately came to us as Jesus – to tell us firsthand how we are to live, not telling us situation-by-situation as the prophets did but by giving us universal standards and commands to love, to help, to forgive.

It is easy for us to believe we are serving God while we are actually doing something else. We have a tendency to view life and love as zero-sum games, to believe that allowing people to make their own choices diminishes the value of our choices, to believe that serving God includes forcing others to serve God as we feel to serve. And so we try to listen, try to hear, try to obey – and get it wrong.

So what do we do? Well, we continue to listen to God. We try to hear God as God calls to us. We try to obey what God tells us to do – probably hoping it doesn't involve moving away from everyone we love! But we always examine what we think God is telling us to do in the light of the gospels. If what we think God is asking us to do hurts instead of helps or removes someone's free will or is not loving, feeding, sheltering, easing burdens of others, it may well **not** be what God is calling us to do. So we need to keep listening!

And we need to remember that even if we mess up – like Abraham – God is with us anyway. To give us, and the world, yet another chance.

Let us pray: Loving God, help us to listen. Help us to hear, whether you speak in the storm, or in a still small voice, or in the sobs of children, or in the cries of protestors, or in the laughter of friends. Help us to obey your commands and help us, always, to love. Amen.