
“Do not doubt, but believe”

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 18 June 2023

Genesis 18:1-15 • Romans 5:1-8 • Matthew 9:35-10:8



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today we have an interesting and important story from Genesis about our father Abraham and his wife Sarah and three mysterious men who visit them. Abraham is sitting by his tent one day when the visitors arrive. He rushes to greet them and to offer them hospitality, as is the custom of his people, and they sit down to await the feast that Abraham's servant will prepare.

At this point in the Genesis story, Abraham has already received the wonderful promise from God that God will make him the father of many nations, and that his descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth or the stars in the sky. It is hard to imagine how Abraham must feel about this great gift from God, but for now, Sarah is still barren, and Abraham has one son only, and that son was not born to Sarah, but to Sarah's serving-girl Hagar. This boy, whose name was Ishmael, was Abraham's heir, but he longed for a son with his wife Sarah. Besides, God had told

Abraham that Ishmael would not be the heir through which Abraham would become the father of many nations. God said that Sarah would herself conceive and bear a son. God repeats this promise several times.

But at the time of our story today, Sarah is still barren, and Abraham is waiting for God's promise to come true. The story focusses on Sarah's disbelief. She laughs when she overhears that she will bear a son, as she says to herself, after she and her husband have grown old; and indeed, we learn in the previous chapter that Abraham is 99 years old! And although we are not specifically told so, I think it's reasonable to assume that Abraham might be having doubts as well. Though Abraham has walked with God and spoken with God through his adult life, it will still be hard to believe that he will bear a son at his advanced age.

And how might we respond to such a promise from God? Well, we do have promises from God, and from Jesus. Going right back to Noah's time, we have a promise that God will never again destroy every living creature on the earth, "as long as the earth endures" (Gen 8:21-22). Do we believe this? What about the big promise Jesus made us, about eternal life through faith? Do we truly believe this will happen?

God gives us every reason to believe that these promises will be kept. Sarah does give birth to a son. In chapter 21, we read:

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. (Gen 21:1-2)

The emphasis is clear: "the Lord was gracious ... *as he had said*"; "the Lord did for Sarah *what he had promised*"; at the very time *God had promised*." There is much about God we do not know, and perhaps will not learn until we come face to face at the ends of our lives; but we know one thing: God keeps his promises. If God did not keep his promises, he would be a hypocrite. God the law-giver would be breaking the laws God created. God created this world to function best when the Ten Commandments are observed, and further, when people put their faith in God and live according to God's guidance.

This should be comforting to us: God is faithful, as it is God's nature to be so; and the world we live in was created to work that way too. So any interaction between God and us will be marked by good faith on God's part; and Jesus is our model for acting in good faith. We should not then assume that God *cannot* break the laws he established for this world, for God is all-powerful. Back to our Genesis story, where God said to Abraham:

Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? (18:13)

Here is further reason to trust the Lord's word. If we ever doubt that God's promises will come true, we should reflect that God is always able to do what he promises, for nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. We may doubt each other's abilities; we may doubt a friend's ability to carry out what he has promised, no matter the friend's intention; but we should never doubt God's faith on that basis.

But, in a sense, God cannot break his promises, for as we believe, faith is part of God's essential nature. This first book of the Bible, Genesis, reveals a lot to us about God's nature. God is faithful, as we see in this story (and others as well). In the second part of this same chapter 18, we read about God's decision to destroy Sodom because of all the wicked things the people are doing there. Abraham pleads with the Lord to change his mind, saying, "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you ... not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?" (18:24) The Lord replies that he will forgive the city for the sake of those fifty righteous people. So we learn other things about God: God is just. God is forgiving.

And when we think about Jesus' great promise of eternal life through faith, we should reflect that Jesus, who is God, is faithful, just, all-powerful and forgiving. As Jesus said to Thomas on the night after the crucifixion: "Do not doubt, but believe" (John 20:27). We too may hear and receive God's promises, and live in the strong assurance that they will come true. Thanks be to God. Amen.