

Sermon: Faithless Father of the Faith

Year A, Proper 6

[Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:23](#)

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[At the end of Genesis 18:1-15]

Abraham's name was Abram when he left his home decades earlier. Even then, in his 40s, he had given up having a child with Sarah, having heir. But God promised that the child would come if he and Sarah followed God's call to leave the land of their fathers and head out where God sent them. God promised them a child, an heir, that would found nations more numerous than sands on the beach, more numerous than stars in the sky. If they would only follow God's call. So they did. What a crazy thing to ask someone to do, to leave their home, leave their family and all the ways they knew of doing things, all the crops they knew and the weather patterns and the secret watering holes. To leave all that without even a destination because God would only tell them where they were going once they got there. All for a promise of child that a couple in their 40s and 50s who have already been married for decades, well, that promise is hard to believe. But they go out into the wilderness. No wonder Abraham is called the Father of the Faith.

And here they are. They did it. Their faith has brought them to this place. They've gotten established. They have a nice place with a good tent. Plenty to eat. Plenty of herd animals. Maybe there isn't the child God promised, but it's pretty good. And just to be sure that God wasn't waiting for them to move into action (you know, God helps those who help themselves), Sarah sent her slave-girl Hagar to Abraham and Hagar delivers a healthy baby boy, named Ishmael. Ishmael is no longer a baby. There's some math problems with his age, but the key point is that he's made it out of his first five years where child mortality was so terrifyingly high. He now has a decent chance to be an old man like his father.

Sarah and Abraham have a nice life. They've convinced themselves with Ishmael's arrival that pretty much all the promises have been kept. This is as good as it gets. It isn't quite the same as having a child of their own. But it's pretty good. So when a stranger says that they *are* going to have a child together, they laugh. *Oh yes, you did laugh* (Genesis 18:15). Sarah's in her 80s. Abraham's in his 90s. There's genuine humor there. And there is the laughter that comes up to hide a long held hurt, something that was longed for for so long and was finally given up on.

But right before Sarah laughs, the stranger, who is indeed the LORD, asks a question, *Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?* (Genesis 18:14). There is the question that Abraham and Sarah have to ask, and Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel, and Joseph. And Moses. And Isaiah. And Jeremiah. And Herod. And Caiaphas. And Pilate. And all Jesus' disciples. It is the question that was asked from a 1,000 years before the birth of Christ to 2,017 years after it. *Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?* Can this world say "no" to the One who Created it, who spoke it into being?

Can this world say, "we're too old, we're too set in our ways, we're too used to a life that has no future"? Can that "no" stand against God's promise. The LORD says, *"Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."* (Genesis 18:14). Before Sarah even gets to laugh, gets to put up the barrier to God's will

in this world, the promise is spoken. A new reality is called into being. A woman whose body has moved beyond the age of children will have a son, an heir.

Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? We know what we're supposed to say, "No, nothing!". But even Jesus asks this question. In Mark, as he prays in the garden of Gethsemane, he asks God to *remove this cup from me, yet not what I will, but thou wilt*. (Mark 14:36). If everything is possible for God, why not circumvent the reality suffering, of hurt, of the Cross in this world?¹ Our faith is not casual, cannot be a happy, clappy everything is possible, suffering in optional faith. God is bound to God's creation. Everything is possible for those who belong to the God of Abraham. But sometimes the possibility, the promise, only comes to those who stay through the dark night of barrenness with God.²

For Abraham and Sarah, there is no simple, painless route to an heir. They can't switch Hagar for Sarah and pretend that Ishmael is the child God promised. And yet to keep believing after years of nothing happening, to keep believing as their bodies do what 80 and 90 year old bodies do, saps their faith. By accepting a good enough life, by accepting Ishmael as the promised child because that they could at least pull off using their own resources, is to walk away from their faith. When we see Abraham as the Father of the Faith, we tend to remember how many times he acted in the face of what was practical and reasonable. But in this moment, when the strangers have left and the child has not yet arrived, he is faithless.

Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son. But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." (Genesis 18:14-15)

[After Genesis 21:1-7]

Be very clear, O ye who follow the God of Abraham. This story shows what a scandal and difficulty our faith is.³ Our faith is not a reasonable act which fits into normal life.⁴ Embrace the good news of the God of Abraham and Sarah and you embrace a commitment to reality shattering and breaking apart. God does not meet Abraham and Sarah all fired up with receptive hopefulness.⁵ God shows up when they are deep in resistant hopelessness.⁶

The God of Abraham insists that no one, no thing, can separate the eternal purpose of God and the concrete biological, chemical, physical reality of this world.⁷ The God of Abraham insists that our faith believe not only that a birth can come about through God's promise, but God's promise is kept to this particular old-age pair, to those the world regarded as good as dead.⁸

This is the key to an incarnational, to an embodied, faith. This is the key to our faith that is lived out in this world of apartment building fires and baseball practice shootings. Life comes only through the promise of God; that promise comes only in the body of the hopeless ones.⁹ This

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 161.

² Brueggemann, 161.

³ Brueggemann, 158.

⁴ Brueggemann, 158.

⁵ Brueggemann, 159.

⁶ Brueggemann, 160.

⁷ Brueggemann, 180.

⁸ Brueggemann, 181.

⁹ Brueggemann, 181.

son comes from a couple without reason to hope. Our faith demands that we affirm that our reality has within it the grounds for hope.¹⁰ What we call a miracle is not the failure of the natural order, but merely our God remaining faithful to the promises our God made.¹¹

We laugh with Sarah, cradling her son Isaac against her heart. We laugh with her because it is how we accept something new, something which cannot be explained, something which we had no ability or resources to bring into being.¹² By God's powerful word, God has broken the grip of death, hopelessness and barrenness.¹³ Isaac is a surprise and Isaac is an impossible reality as he sleeps under his father's watching eye. The fortunes of the people of the God of Abraham, the fortunes of Israel are forever inverted by the promises of God.¹⁴

¹⁰ Brueggemann, 181.

¹¹ Brueggemann, 182.

¹² Brueggemann, 182.

¹³ Brueggemann, 183.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, 183.