

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Genesis 18:9-15 & 21:1-7

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Introduction

Last week, we talked about the significance of names. I had a lot of fun as people came up to me and emailed me about the origins of their own names. Names will actually be a mini theme over the next few sermons. When we met last week, we talked about both the significance of a name and the significance of the process of naming someone or something.

This week, we'll look at both as we consider the story of Isaac's birth. Before we get too far, though, let's fill in the gaps. As a reminder, last week we began a series of sermons that will carry us through the Old Testament until Christmas. Between the creation of Adam and the birth of Isaac, a lot happened. I'm going to summarize it in 30-seconds. Someone get the stopwatch out.

Filling the Gaps

Genesis 1-11 are considered pre-history stories in Scripture. Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel. Noah and the flood. The tower of Babel. These stories allegorically teach us about the foundations of God, humanity, and the world. Namely, God is good; God is Creator; but God's creation was corrupted by human sin. Thus we

have the murder of Abel, the flood of God to wipe out sin, the ego of the builders of the Tower of Babel.

Then, in Genesis 12, there's a significant genre shift. In Genesis 12, we meet Israel's first patriarch, Abram, who would later be renamed Abraham. God makes a covenant with Abraham, that Abraham's descendents will become a great nation and that God will bless this group of people so that they will be a blessing to the whole world. So Abraham travels around modern-day Israel, Palestine, and Egypt as a nomad. He and his wife Sarah are unable to conceive a child. Abraham is stressing out, how is it that God is going to make my descendents into a great nation if I can't even produce one descendent?!

Then, in Genesis 18 just before our reading today, three visitors come to Abraham. We don't know much about these visitors, but before they show up it says that Abraham was visited by the Lord, and when he looked up, here are these three visitors. So, angels? Most likely. No matter who or what they are, they are clearly the Lord's messengers. Their message? Abraham and Sarah will have a son.

Now, if God had promised you descendents, and you hadn't produced any yet, and a messenger of God comes and says it's gonna happen, you'd be happy right? Overjoyed, maybe? Not Sarah. Why? Because Sarah was old. She had gone through menopause (the biblical words for menopause are "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women"). In other words, Sarah couldn't have children. It's biologically impossible. So,

Sarah, must have been devastated. You're going to promise descendents, not provide us any descendents, and then mock me with another promise of descendents after I physically can't do that anymore? Seriously?

But Sarah is not devastated either. I think this promise of a child is too outlandish to even be mad at. Sarah becomes cynical.

Genesis 18:12 says, "So Sarah laughed at herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'"

And if Sarah lived in our time, it would have sounded like this:

"HA! Pff, yeah right. Whatever you say, God."

Laughter like this, cynical laughter, is the kind that covers up our wounds. It tries to protect us from seeming sad, weak, upset. So Sarah laughs at the ridiculousness of this promise. Now, Sarah is by herself when she laughs. Abraham is still being visited by God, and God says to Abraham, "Why is Sarah laughing?" And then God asks Abraham, and all of us, this, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? The word wonderful, I think, has lost some of its punch in our times. It's bigger than how we often use it. We would say wonderful to just about anything.

"I'll just be a few minutes late." "Wonderful." "How was your hamburger." "It was wonderful."

Here, this word for wonderful can also be translated extraordinary or difficult. Which makes sense when we plug it in - Is anything too extraordinary for the Lord? Is anything too difficult for the

Lord? As we proceed, feel free to plug in these words when you hear the question, Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

When Sarah is faced with the impossibility of having a child, God asks, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

When we are faced with challenges and seeming impossibilities, God asks us, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” How would you answer that question if God asked you that? I think my honest answer would be something along the lines of, “Well, no, but...”

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

God answers the question a few chapters later, in the second part of today’s main reading. Genesis 21:1: The Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.” And the fulfillment of this promise brought Sarah to laughter. But unlike the first time, when it was a cynical laughter, this time it was joyful laughter. God turns our laughter of cynicism into laughter of joy. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

So, Abraham and Sarah named their firstborn son Isaac. Now, based on the introduction of this sermon, you know by now that Isaac is a special name, right? Isaac comes from the word for laughter. So when Sarah says, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me,” the play on words is that it kinda sound like she’s saying God has brought Isaac for me.

God turned Sarah's cynical laughter into joyful laughter. And to continue this joyful laughter, they name their son after the word for laughter. An old woman well past the age of childbearing bears a child. And in her joy, she knows that everyone who hears this will join her in laughing with joy. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Other Stories: Thomas

We see a great example of cynicism turning into joy in Scripture. In one of my favorite stories, the disciple Thomas gets his infamous nickname. Do you know Thomas's nickname? Doubting Thomas. Poor Thomas. All the disciples had seen Jesus in the flesh after he had died, except Thomas. So Thomas, rightfully so perhaps, was skeptical, maybe even a little cynical.

When the other disciples said, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas replied, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the ails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." In other words, Thomas responded a little like Sarah. "Ha! Pfff, Yeah right...Whatever you say, disciples." You can imagine some cynical laughter coming out of Thomas, right?

Jesus's resurrection was too wonderful for Thomas to believe. But is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

A week later, Thomas and the disciples were hanging out, and out of nowhere, Jesus shows up. "Peace be with you," he said. And then he goes to Thomas, and says, "Put your finger here and see

my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” And Thomas, like Sarah, turns his cynicism into joy. He says, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus comes up to Thomas and basically says, Thomas, is anything too wonderful for the Lord? And Thomas’s joy was so great that he didn’t even touch Jesus’s scars. He didn’t have to. All he could say was My Lord and My God.

Other Stories: MLK

I’ll share with you another story of cynicism turning into joy. This one is more contemporary.

“At times we may feel that we do not need God, but on the day when the storms of disappointment rage, the winds of disaster blow, and the tidal waves of grief beat against our lives, if we do not have a deep and patient faith our emotional lives will be ripped to shreds. There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God” (115)...he goes on to list ‘gods’ as money, pleasure, and ‘science’ (which I would call technology)

“Only God is able. It is faith in him that we must rediscover. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy and bring new light into the dark caverns of pessimism.” In other words, our faith can transform the

hopelessness of an old, barren Sarah into the joy of Sarah, the mother of Isaac.

Then he tells this story:

“After a particularly strenuous day, I settled in bed at a late hour. My wife had already fallen asleep and I was about to doze off when the telephone rang. An angry voice said, ‘Listen, n-----, we’ve taken all we want from you. Before next week you’ll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.’ I hung up, but I could not sleep. It seemed that all my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

“I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally, I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.

“At that moment I experience the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice , saying, ‘Stand up for

righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.

“Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust. I knew now that God is able to give us the interior resources to face the storms and problems of life.”

Strength and trust in the midst of the storms and problems of life. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Conclusion

So we’ve heard the story of Thomas, and a story from Martin Luther King. What about your story? What is it in your life that you would deem too wonderful or too extraordinary or too difficult for the Lord?

I don’t want to stand up here and tell you that faith in God will make everything difficult disappear. That wasn’t the case with Dr. King, that hasn’t been the case in my life or in the lives I’ve learned about in this congregation. But, what our faith does tell us is that nothing is impossible for God. And to overcome some of these impossibilities, God will perform miracles, like in the story of Isaac or Thomas. But sometimes, and I’ve found these more common in my life, God quietly equips us to face adversity, as in

the story of Dr. King. Examine your life, your story. Wrestle with this question: Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?