

“Is Anything Too Wonderful for the Lord?”

Genesis 18:1-15

Sunday, June 15, 2008—Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Let’s ask the question another way: Is anything impossible for God?

Abraham and Sarah had their doubts. Frankly, I can’t blame them. Over a period of twenty five years, God has made them a whole lot of promises. Last week, in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, we heard God tell Abraham to leave home and go to a new land God would show him. God promises land, offspring, and blessings. And then in chapter 13, God elaborates: “You’ll have offspring as numerous as the grains of dust of the earth” (13:15-16). By the time chapter 15 rolls around, Abraham is getting a little impatient. “What’s with these promises, anyway, God?” he wants to know. “You promised us offspring, but let’s face it, you’ve been a little lacking when it comes to the follow through.” And so God makes another expansive promise: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. That’s how many descendants you’re going to have.” (15:5). More years pass; by chapter 17, Abraham is 100 years old, Sarah is over 90, and still no children. God again speaks to Abraham. “I’ll make you a promise, a covenant,” God says. “It will be between me, you, and your offspring after you, forever and ever. I’ll be your faithful God, world without end” (17:7-8). And then God offers some specifics: “Next year at this time, your wife Sarah will have a son, and you’ll name him Isaac” (17:19-21).

In this morning’s reading, God decides it’s time to actually get up close and personal with Abraham. So God shows up, looking for all the world like some ordinary stranger, except it would have been a little unusual for anyone to be out for a stroll in the desert in the heat of the day with two buddies. Abraham doesn’t recognize God right away, but he sees the three men coming and rushes out to invite them in for some rest and refreshment. Hospitality was a big deal in the ancient world; if you were walking in the desert in the heat of the day, your life could depend on the willingness of those you met along the way to offer you food and water and shade. So the three men stop for a rest. Abraham tells Sarah to make some special cakes for the visitors, instructs the servants to prepare a feast with a tender stewed calf as the main course, and after a few hours, the meal is ready and the visitors begin to eat. That’s when one of the visitors speaks up and echoes what God has said before: “I will return to you, and Sarah will have a son. You’ll see, I’ll be back and make it happen.”

While Abraham, who has heard this particular promise before, rolls his eyes silently, Sarah breaks out laughing. “Excuse me, Sir? Have you lost your marbles, out here in the midday sun? Unless you’ve lived your life under a rock, you surely know that there’s an age after which women don’t have children, and I’ve been in that category for a good forty years now. So I’ll assume you’re making a joke that’s really not very funny. Let’s all have a good laugh at your bad joke! Ha, Ha!”

Sarah laughed. Can you hear the sound of her laugh? I can. I can hear the pain of years of yearning that have come to nothing. I can hear the anger of years of hoping and being disappointed. I can hear the frustration with what must have felt like yet another cruel promise.

I've seen it and heard it with couples today who struggle with the agony of infertility, who are desperate to be parents and who find their bodies have betrayed them in this most powerful, intimate and basic of human desires, to create a family. In the ancient world, there was an added burden to infertility, because a woman unable to have children was considered cursed by God. Barrenness was regarded as a punishment for some wrongdoing; she was left to ponder what she had done to deserve her fate.

Sarah laughed. It was a hollow laugh, a brittle laugh, a cold, hard laugh. She and Abraham had learned to live with infertility. They'd accepted it. They were resigned to it. Their dreams had been swallowed up by their realism. After all, there were no infertility clinics, no in vitro fertilization in those days. So they'd stopped hoping, long ago. That door had closed for them. They'd grieved the death of their dream, and I've known enough people who've experienced infertility to know the loss of the dream of parenthood is a death that must be grieved. And as for God's promises of offspring, well, for Abraham and Sarah, twenty five years of God's promises were enough. That chapter of their lives was closed. Period.

And yet, and yet. God asked: Why does Sarah laugh? Is there anything that is beyond God's power?

God asks each one of us that question. It's a question that goes to the heart of what we really believe about God. Is God limited by our expectations of what is possible? Or is nothing too wonderful, too extraordinary for God? Abraham and Sarah have a son, Isaac, born the following year, just as God promised, when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. Into the midst of death and grief and finality, God ultimately brings unexpected new life. In the face of human resignation, God brings extravagant, abundant new hope. In the face of human desperation, God brings an astounding turnaround. In the face of human hopelessness, God brings a startling new beginning. That is who God is. That is what God does. That is God's answer to the question, is there any problem too big for God?

But each of us gets to answer that question for ourselves. And how we answer that question determines a lot about how we are going to live. Do we live in a dead end world where nothing can change? Well then, we're off the hook. The best excuse for doing nothing is that nothing we do will make a difference. World peace? Pie in the sky by and by. Poverty? Out of sight, out of mind. Relationship problems? He or she will never change. Church problems? Those people will never understand what it means to be a Christian.

I think often we don't even get around to asking what God can do in the situation in which we find ourselves. Instead, we look at the world from the perspective of what we can do. And if we can't do it, or we think we can't do it, or we just plain don't want to do it, then it can't be done. If it can't be done, then it's best not to try. No point in getting our hopes up, only to have them dashed. Fear of failure and disappointment take over. So we walk away, turn our backs on what feels to us like a hopeless case. We abandon that church or we ditch that relationship. We give up. Like Sarah, we resign ourselves to a closed future. Sometimes we call this being realistic.

God calls us to see from a radically different perspective. It's called the gospel. Its claims are wildly, outrageously impractical, profoundly unrealistic, and scandalous in the extreme. When

we proclaim that God took on human flesh and came among us as Jesus Christ, we proclaim that God does what we cannot, and that it is the very nature of God to do the impossible out of God's inexhaustible love for us. When we proclaim that God raised Jesus from death, we proclaim that God recognizes no hopeless cases. The power of God's love has forever defeated the worst the world can ever do. No, God is not limited by what we think is possible.

The story of Abraham and Sarah tells us something else about God: God always keeps God's promises. Some of us are a little vague on exactly what God has and has not promised us, so let's be clear about that. God has never promised us easy, pain-free, or trouble free lives. God has never promised to give us whatever we want, whenever we want it, provided we ask nice. God has not promised to protect us from the consequences of our own bad choices. But God has promised to be our God and never to abandon us. God did not turn away from Abraham and Sarah because they doubted, made mistakes, or showed poor judgment, as they did on various occasions. God did not give up on Sarah because she became old and bitter or because she laughed. God hangs in there with us, when we are at our best, and when we are at our worst. God is with us in the good times, in the bad times, in the grieving times and in the boring and ordinary times. God is faithful in the times of waiting, the times of anger and regret, the times when we need a second chance, and the times when we need to offer a second chance to someone else. God is always there, empowering us to do what we by ourselves cannot do, and what we think cannot be done. We don't know what God will do exactly, when God will do it, or how God will do it. Sometimes we have to wait a long time. Sometimes it is only in retrospect that we can see the hand of God at work. We only know that God has promised to be there and to work for our good, and that God can be trusted.

I've had many times, both inside and outside the church, when I've felt literally at the end of my resources with a problem I simply could not resolve. Sometimes I've had to struggle a long time to be able to say: God, I don't know what to do. I don't know how to do it. It's your world. It's your church. Show me the way, and I'll do my best to follow. Then it will happen. After months of being stuck, something will change. I'll get an idea, seemingly from nowhere. Or someone else will do or say something that changes my perspective. And it works. Now why didn't I think of that?

Where have you closed the door on hope? Where do you long for life, but have settled for death long ago? What do you believe is impossible for God? The unhealable hurts, the unbridgeable gulfs, the unchangeable facts, the insurmountable problems are the places that the God of Abraham and Sarah longs to meet you, not necessarily to give you everything you want, but to bring new life to the one you already have.

God in Jesus Christ brings newness to every dead end. He'll come, into the desert of your need. You won't always recognize him, he may look like three strangers out for a walk, but he has a promise for you, and you can trust him. Take a deep breath, invite him in. Sarah laughed, but the next year, Isaac was born. For God, nothing is too wonderful.

May God's name be glorified and praised, now and forever, world without end. Amen.