

October 21, 2018

Lesson 8: Abraham and Sarah Birth God's People

Scripture: Gen. 18:9-15; Gen. 21:1-7

Context:

The scripture lesson today moves from Abraham going to the new land to God fulfilling the covenant promise made that he will be the father of an entire nation. Yet, as we left off in chapter twelve, Abraham was very old when he moved to this new land. In the course of his time there, three visitors make their way to his tent.

Our text jumps into the middle of their time as they inquire to the presence of his wife Sarah. When he tells them she is the tent, they tell him that this time next year, Sarah will have a son. As Sarah hears this prophecy inside the tent, she laughs to herself. Both Abraham and Sarah are old and Sarah has gone through menopause.

The Lord reveals to Abraham that Sarah laughs and takes it as a time to ask if anything is too difficult for the Lord. Sarah lies because she is frightened at what may happen because she laughed. She honestly thought the visitor was making a joke and now she realizes that this visitor might be someone else.

Yet the Lord does not abandon her. God is with Sarah as she becomes pregnant and gives birth to one son, Isaac. Abraham is one hundred years old when Isaac is born and all we know about Sarah is that she too is in old age. Sarah sees the laughter in a new light. This laughter is one of joy and of discovery. God is part of her joy that all can laugh with her as they reflect on being "older" parents.

Of course there are other parts of the text not included in the lesson that draws attention to the family tension that happens in this miraculous birth. Part of this includes the fact that Sarah gives Abraham her female slave Hagar before she becomes pregnant to produce a son and the two mothers soon enter into battle with one another over the proper place for their son. The material could be used for a Jerry Springer episode.

However, within this specific text, we see how faith is often difficult to understand and mysterious. Faith is not a reasonable act that fits into the normal scheme of life.¹ In this case, Abraham and Sarah had become resigned to their barrenness and to what that life looked like. Yet, the story reveals that this is also about call. Even as Sarah and Abraham do what God tells them to do, they see this new call as nonsensical.² They describe it as impossible.

God though persists on the call even as they run from it. This is something that will happen despite their laughter and dismissal. God is faithful and thus Abraham and Sarah come to learn a different understanding of possibility, call, and faith. Their world is turned upside down in a good way.

Application

Before continuing on with this text and its application, I do think an important

¹ Walter Brueggeman, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1982), 158.

² *Ibid.*, 159.

note to address is how this text has been misinterpreted and what it does not mean. When some have read this text, they have said that parents who struggle with fertility do so because they do not have a strong faith. That is not the truth. This text is not about a test of faith on the part of Abraham or Sarah. Just because you possess a strong faith does not mean that things such as infertility or cancer will never come your way. Some of the strongest Christians I know are those who have never been able to have children and they now have either adopted children or adopted those around them with their love and care.

Perhaps a better angle to look at in this case is the faithfulness of the Lord and on the call portion of this story. In this text, the Lord promises Abraham that he will be the patriarch of as many people as “stars of the sky.” Those words are true; God is faithful. Three of the major world religions consider Abraham to be their forefather of the faith. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all venerate Abraham and claim that he the first spiritual forefather of their tradition. How amazing that millions, even billions, of people claim this man as the one from whom their faith has its roots. Maybe if we were all to take a moment and realize that fact, then maybe we might see each other a little differently. Just as we are different from our siblings if we have them, so too are the different religions. We are all different but we share a very special person as integral to our faith story. Whether we want to admit it or not, we share a spiritual heritage with many people.

In the case to faithfulness on the part of the Lord, we see that God stands by Abraham and Sarah even when they laugh and when they are doubtful. God is with Sarah as she becomes pregnant and gives birth to her first son in her old age. From Sarah’s reaction about laughter and God surprising her, I think we learn a lesson about God giving us different things at different times in our life. God is faithful in all seasons even if we do not understand the how or why at the time. When I look back at different seasons of life, I see different blessings and realize that the same will take place in the future. God is with us in the different lessons we learn and in the different experiences we go through. Throughout life, we receive different lessons that give us different questions to reflect upon that constantly reappear in our life. When have you felt God at work in a situation that seemed hopeless at first? What did you learn about faith and God’s promises? When was a time that God made you laugh? How have the moments of doubts been moments of growth for you?

Yet even in those different seasons, God still gives us a calling. Much like Abraham and Sarah were surprised to have a child in old age, we too can be sometimes surprised by what God calls for us to do at whatever stage in life we find ourselves. Because of free will, God has given us a choice about how we will respond to things that come our way in life. I think that in some ways, a calling is the same. We may know that God has called us to do something, but we may run from it or we may try to believe that God could not use us to do such a thing. Often when I hear some people talk about their calls to ministry, there is a period or a time when they ran, scared because they knew that by responding to a call, their life would never be the same.

Yet that is the very thing that happens when we follow Jesus. We may start out with our agenda of how life is to be and we may have it all mapped out. Yet when Jesus gets ahold of us, that agenda gets thrown out the window. Instead we get to be a part of things that may seem scary, uncomfortable, and disarming. Yet as we do, God does amazing thing through us that we could never imagine doing on our own. Like Abraham and Sarah, we become a part of a story that is bigger than us, yet needs us in the midst of

it to respond to our part of the plot. What is God calling you to do? What seemingly impossible dream has God put on your heart to chase?

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