

HOLD THE SERMON TITLE SLIDE

Have you ever hoped for something, worked for it, prayed for it, and still it didn't happen? Who hasn't had a dream not realized, a plan not fulfilled, and a goal not met? When things don't work out we may at times try to figure out how come.

The Old Testament text for Genesis 18 is part of the Story of Abraham and Sarah. Now Abraham and Sarah were chosen to be God's people and from them nations would arise. They would be God's chosen people with a purpose to bless others with the blessings God first gave to them. By the time of our reading for today, the promise of the Lord was decades old. Both Abraham and Sarah had doubted that it would be fulfilled. To their surprise, three strangers show up and renew God's promise. "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah will have a son."

SLIDE 1 – Delay and Promises

This announcement is about a time long overdue. Biblical timing is often "off." This announcement is long overdue, past when the normal season would come around. Sarah was now near 90 years old and Abraham near 100. The season, the timing, the stage of life, no matter how you look at it, comes at an awkward time of life. This is one of the first of many times in both the Old and New Testaments that a significant pregnancy or birth takes place at an awkward time of life.

Both Abraham and Sarah have come up short in trusting that God's promises would come true. Abraham acted to protect himself, saying Sarah was his sister and not his wife when they found themselves in foreign lands. Abraham did not trust God to protect them. He thought that he could tell half-truths and survive. But such subterfuge was not God's plan.

Sarah tried to handle the matter of infertility by developing a plan using the law. Abraham could legally father a son using Sarah's servant as a surrogate. Sarah recruited Hagar who became pregnant with Abraham and a son Ishmael was born. Ishmael could be known as Abraham and Sarah's heir, however, this was not God's plan.

It took years for God's plan to be fulfilled. The delay was untenable. How long should they wait? How long should they pray? How long should they wander?

How many times have we waited to see God's promises come true? There are those who fight addiction, and who find themselves in a streak of freedom, only to have the old demons resurface, creating doubt and fear. There are those caught in cycles of hectic scheduling and unending deadlines and they wonder how Sabbath rest and joy can be part of life. There are those who struggle with chronic and long term diseases who pray for health and wholeness daily.

It is not that God is late in giving blessing it is that we lack understanding for all that gets in the way of blessing. Sometimes it is our own resistance, sometimes it is circumstances we find ourselves in, and sometimes it is not being open to the movement of God before us.

SLIDE – Oak Forest, Devils Lake State Park

In our text for today Abraham looks up from his small piece of oasis to see three strangers arrive. In ancient times travelers were vulnerable to hunger and thirst in the region where Abraham was living. He had set up camp near the Oak of Mamre. I recently visited this oak forest at Devils Lake State Park. Devils Lake State Park is known for its spectacular views from the East and West Trails which involve a strenuous climb up rocky stairs but we also found this lovely Grotto Trail. It was an oasis for us.

The place where Abraham camped was not likely this lush. It was a drier region. Abraham offered his visitors an opportunity to rest, a place of quiet and renewal and coolness on a w, water to wash their feet, food and drink to nourish their bodies. In the story in Genesis Abraham loses himself, extends hospitality, an extravagant hospitality, the kind of abundance that is present when God is at hand. He quickly moves to greet them. He calls Sarah to make bread from gallons of flour, a servant to butcher a young animal that would provide at least 30 pounds of meat, and others to bring comfort food.

Here the abundance that Abraham offers is an image of the presence of God, who is found in the midst of people's everyday lives. Genesis 18 does not imagine a distant God but a God who eats with people and who is intimately involved in matters that cause concern for people, such as infertility, insecurity, and fear of

the future. The way to entering into the joy and way of God is not a direct path. Human characters have lapses of faith, but God is persistent.

SLIDE – Faith the Size of a Mustard Seed

AT first look Abraham appears to know what is happening but the back story reveals a man in need of transformation.

Gen 17 is entirely concerned with binding Abraham to God in radical faith. The promises of God are extravagant: I will make my covenant with you

You will be exceedingly numerous

You will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations

I will make you exceedingly fruitful

I will make nations of you

Kings shall come from you

I will establish my covenant with you and throughout the generations

I will establish an everlasting covenant

You shall keep my covenant

I will bless Sarah and will give you a son by her

She will give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her

What is Abraham's response to all of these promises? He laughed and questioned God's promise. Abraham completely doubts the promise, laughs a mocking laugh, and appeals to the son already in hand, the son of Hagar, Ishmael. Abraham, the father of faith, is here again presented as the unfaithful one, unable to trust, and willing to rely on an alternative to the promise. The failure to understand is not a matter of intelligence but of will. Abe does not understand the promise and its strange character. The laugh and the reference to Ishmael are attempts to avoid the deep and unsettling claim God now makes on him. The unsettling claim is that Abraham should believe these promises in the absence of proof.

Are we living in a time when God has made deep and unsettling claims on our lives? Do we reject God's future or do we not understand or are we unable to believe the promise of the gospel?

The way of God is always creating new out of nothing. It is the grace in the very first words of Genesis, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and earth, the earth was nothing, a formless void until God spoke, "Let there be light" and there was light. God creates a newness underived from the old.

The same miracle takes place in the New Testament as the disciples struggle to understand. The disciples, like Abraham, have a crisis of faith. Time and again they fail to perceive the life-giving power which comes from Jesus and the character of the ministry which Jesus embodies. Jesus, in the gospel of Luke, tells the disciples that he will one day be betrayed. The scriptures tell us the meaning of this was concealed from the disciples, and they could not understand it. The disciples in Luke argue about greatness among themselves and wonder about destroying those who do not receive Jesus. Instead, Jesus counsels the disciples to practice welcome and hospitality, and to give more time for those who do not understand.

In today's brief Gospel text from Luke, Jesus acknowledges and values Martha's independence and ability to host him in her home. Jesus also values the curiosity of Mary and gives her the freedom of education. Service and learning go hand in hand. Jesus gives a foretaste of equality without any further explanation. Such independence and freedom were not usual in the normal patterns of life. But with Jesus newness will emerge.

SLIDE – Humanly speaking, not possible, but with God...

In our Old Testament story, Abraham fails to discern in God's promise the capacity for new life. Abraham fails to see that God will do a new thing through old and spent lives. The story beyond our text is that the power of God will give a child of promise, even in Abraham and Sarah's old age! The story eventually shows how radical faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act which fits the normal scheme of life and understanding. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom. The good news of new life does not meet them in receptive hopefulness but in the midst of a down cycle, when they are resistant and hopeless.

Even though the overall story of Abraham and Sarah is about a call embraced, here in this text the call is rejected as something which makes no sense. If newness must come from the resources which are known, the promise announced in our text does not make sense. The strangers renew God's promise. "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah will have a son."

SLIDE – Is anything too hard for the Lord?

The promise is given. The word has been uttered. If we read just a few verses further, we hear that Sarah doubts that she and Abraham will have a son in their old age. The story leaves them thinking what they can see and understand is all there is. But not everything depends on their response. The resolve of God to open a new future by a new heir from this old couple does not depend on the readiness of Abraham and Sarah to accept it. One day they will know that with God nothing is impossible.

The question of God doing the impossible still surrounds us.

The story in Genesis is one of always waiting to see if God can do what God says he will do. Faith is a scandal. The promise is beyond our expectation and beyond all evidence. The “impossibility possibility” of God deals frighteningly with our future. Yet with God, our future is secure. God fulfills God’s word.