

June 30

No, Nothing Is Too Hard for the Lord

Genesis 18:1-15 and Genesis 21:1-7

This is one of my favorite stories from the Old Testament. We are going to go through it two times, looking at it from Abram's perspective and then we will again view it from Sarai's vantage point.

Imagine this story, listening with the ears of Abram. It is the heat of the day. You are sitting by your tent, lethargic and probably not wanting to engage socially with others. Then these strangers appear. You must have nodded off. The first question that I ask myself is, "What was Abram's perception of the strangers?" Did he immediately know that they were agents of God? We can tell that he believed them to be important people because of the meal he prepares. Did he offer hospitality to them because custom dictated it or because it was in his nature? The meal he prepared goes way beyond the customary hospitality requirements. It was lavish with fresh baked bread, a calf slaughtered and more. It would have taken quite some time to prepare such a feast. It was a form of radical hospitality. And I am sure he was glad to have gone to such lengths when he realized that God's agents were the ones who were his guests.

Because of this encounter, other writers remind us to be kind to strangers because in doing so we might entertain angels unawares. From the beginning of our faith, there has always been the call for us to practice radical hospitality. What does that look like? Radical hospitality is doing more than what is required. Radical hospitality is more than doing something because you are supposed to; it is intentionally seeing the face of God in people and striving to treat them as honored guests.

I recall the story, likely apocryphal, of the man on his way to a job interview. He had been out of work for some time and really needed the job. He had dressed nicely and nervously was driving towards the interview when he noticed a woman by the side of the road with a flat tire. It was raining, she was driving a nice car, she had to have a cell phone and triple A. He drove past but his mother's voice rang in his ear, "If I were by the side of the road what would you want others to do for me?" So, he stopped, backed up and offered to change her tire. By the time he was finished he was wet, dirty and late. When she offered to pay him, he refused saying, "I did this to make my mom

proud.” He drove to his interview knowing it was pointless to even show up. The receptionist took one look at him and he could tell she was not impressed. He was about to leave when her phone buzzed. Surprised, he was told to go right in. The interviewer had seen him come in and, I think you know the rest of the story. The woman he helped was the one doing the hiring. He got the job.

We all have chances, even today, to practice hospitality. Don’t take it for granted but see it as a calling. Getting back to our story, Abram, realizing it is the messenger of God, hears the same old promise. How does it feel to hear again you will be the father of a great nation, when you are old and worn out? We know Abram had gotten angry once before over hearing these words. This time there is silence. That silence says volumes, doesn’t it. Then he hears that “Nothing is too hard for God.” What do you think about their words? How do you respond to the idea that nothing is too hard for God? It is easy to feel overwhelmed and believe that God doesn’t get what you are going through. It takes real faith to continue to believe when everything says to give up. Not always, in our lifetime, will things be resolved. We are to believe that whatever is happening, God knows, that God is at work; and never put a period on a situation when God is saying, not yet. Even if the situation itself is not resolved, perhaps something new can come out of seeming endings.

Now let us turn our attention to Sarai. If you were Sarai how would you feel when Abram comes into the tent telling you to prepare a feast for visitors? Remember it is the heat of the day. Who wants to knead bread, cook meat and all the rest when you are tired? Would you gladly prepare a meal because you too believe in radical hospitality or would you be peevish because you are tired? Would you be feeling gracious or impatient?

If you were Sarai, how would you feel to hear the promise? We know that she laughed. Was it the laughter of joy believing that the promise still might happen, or was it the laugh of derision? Was she hopeful or thinking, “You don’t know what you are talking about.”

In her case how would she have responded to the idea that nothing is too hard for God? It doesn’t seem that this message was embraced with trust. Instead, you

probably have tears right after the laughter. She was reminded once more that she was barren and the words of someone outside the tent promising that she would have a child would seem almost cruel. She could probably accept, at some level, that nothing is too hard for God, but biology doesn't lie. Her chances of having a child were done. Why was God tormenting her again?

Sometimes it hurts to believe in the promises of God. To keep on believing is hard, when all it does is open up old wounds. But again, this story reminds us that God is at work. I think her story gives us the permission to laugh at what God is doing. In the beginning the laugh was of scorn. But later it was the laughter of joy at the impossible becoming possible.

For, as the story ends, a year later the visitors return and just as promised there is a boy born to Sarai. He is named Isaac, which means laughter. Abram and Sarai receive new names from God. They are now forever known as Abraham and Sarah. The change in names reflects that the promise has been fulfilled. The spiritual heritage of Abraham is belief. We hear that he believed and God considered it righteous. What is the spiritual heritage of Sarah? I believe it is a reminder that laughter through the tears is all right. She was not punished for her laughter. She remembered that day because of the name her son is given. It is our legacy as well that beyond the pain and questions there can be new beginnings.

So what do we take from here today. Abraham and Sarah teach us to embrace the fact that God is at work even when it seems an impossibility. Where in your life are all the facts telling you there is no hope? How do you respond to the idea that nothing is impossible for the lord? This is not a call to stubbornly hang on to something no matter what. Sometimes, we are called to leave things behind. I see many a person mentally stuck at some point in their life and unable to move forward. This is instead living fully today, letting go of the past and yet realizing that God might still bring about resolution, new beginnings or possibilities.

I think about my life. Some of you have heard this story. I had an adoptive sister who, in her early 20's cut herself off totally from our family. She was living a wild life style and after words between her and my parents she left the area and moved to

California. For about ten years someone in the family heard from her about every six months. Then nothing. After more than two decades we all came to the decision that something had happened to her and she was likely dead. Every once in a while I would think about her and grieve. It seemed like a total ending. Then about five years ago, thirty years after I last had heard from her, I received a birthday card from her. How she found me, I will never know. We began to visit on the phone on a regular basis until her health began to fail and just a few months ago she passed away. I am so glad we had those few years. We got to share pictures, laugh a little, and cry a little. I still have that card as a reminder that nothing is too hard for the Lord.

So be radically hospitable, be hopeful and celebrate that God is always with you, trying to bring something new to fruition. And yes, we too might laugh at what God can and is doing in our lives.