

Written Copy: Genesis 17:16-19 "This is My Son Ishmael"

Midweek Advent Service #2

Wednesday, December 7th, 2022

Text: Genesis 17:16-19

¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" ¹⁹ God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

Exegetical Statement

The LORD promised Abram that he would be the father of a multitude that would be as great as the stars in the sky. Abram's faith in the LORD's promise declares him to be in right standing with the LORD. But 10 years go by and his wife Sari remains barren. She becomes impatient with her embarrassing state, and Abram's faith in the LORD's promise falters, and he agrees to her suggestion that they try to bring about this promise about offspring by their own will and plan. At Sarai's suggestion Abram sleeps with Hagar, her Egyptian servant who becomes pregnant by him. In her eyes this changes her status to the position of wife, and she looks with contempt upon her mistress who cannot conceive and provide what she can for Abram. Sarai becomes enraged and complains that Hagar's attitude is all his fault. Rather than deal with it he tells Sarai to treat her as the slave she is. So Sari mistreats her so badly she runs away. But the Angel of the LORD comes to her and tells her He sees her affliction. He orders her to return to her mistress in the vocation of slave because He will be with her watching over her, and He will bless her son, whom she is to name Ishmael. He himself will be the father of many people. He will be a restless wild soul who will live in conflict with his neighbors and his relatives. She recognizes the LORD as the God who looks after her and she returns and gives birth to Ishmael.

Focus Statement:

The LORD had His reason to make Abram and Sarai wait, so that they might understand the fulfillment of His promise was by His gracious miraculous work and not their own. Isaac's birth foreshadowed the birth of Abram's greater Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who came by God's mighty and powerful working to make us children of Abraham by the faith He grants us through Jesus' work, given in the Gospel. Jesus is the Savior who came at just the right time

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Like Abram and Sarai, we get impatient for God to act in the manner and the time we see fit. When we take matters into our own hands instead of solving the problem it can become worse.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Prayerfully lift up our needs and desires to Him, and patiently await His answer which will come at just the right time. Believe that we are declared to be His precious children and kept in that faith even as He makes us wait

Subject Sentence:

Introduction: Trying to Open Doors of Opportunity By Myself

I remember when the Lord started to put the notion into my head and heart that He wanted me to be a Pastor. At the time I was working as a manager at Hiller's Market, a small independent grocery store chain. I didn't enjoy it. I didn't think I was doing a good job at it. I didn't think I had what it took to do the job that needed to be done. Now the Lord had used the Deacon Program to show me that ministry was something He had in mind for me. But I wanted that to be my full-time vocation now. Working at Hillers and trying to serve as a Deacon was very difficult. I had the opportunity occasional lead worship and preach, especially when my Pastor was on vacation, or otherwise assist with the liturgy when he was there. But it wasn't easy. I was required to work every third Sunday at Hillers, which meant that if I wanted to assist with anything during Sunday worship, I had to work a closing shift Saturday night, and then work a closing shift on Sunday, a busy and difficult shift to work. It was like working two jobs but only getting paid for one. I loved serving, but it was taxing on me and on my family.

It was then I heard about the Specific Ministry Pastor program (or SMP). It involved me taking Seminary classes online, with only occasional trips for onsite classes and instruction at the Seminary itself. And it was on the job training where I would be called to work as a Pastor doing pretty much what I had been doing as a Deacon, but I would be employed full-time by my home congregation. I thought this would be a great answer for them. They wanted to grow, but had reached a threshold that they couldn't break through. As our Pastor said there is only so many parishioners one Pastor can handle, and he felt he had reached that maximum. While the leaders of the congregation wanted to grow, they were not yet quite big enough to afford calling a 2nd full time Pastor with a Master of Divinity degree. But they might be able to afford me as an SMP Pastor.

I really thought this was a win-win situation. It was the perfect time and place for me who wanted to quit Hillers and become a Pastor, as well as for them who wanted to grow. So, I got all my information together, including facts and figures on how I, an SMP Pastor could help expand ministry, and draw more people to our day school, and how I would come cheaper than calling an MDiv Pastor. I presented all this to the Board of Elders. I was quite sure they would go for this, as many of these men seemed to be pleased with what I'd been doing as a Deacon. So, I was floored when their answer came back as "no", not at this time. I was disappointed. I was devastated, so much so that I considered leaving the Deacon program and the ministry forever. I couldn't understand why the Lord would put this desire into my head and yet not open this door of obvious opportunity.

Perhaps you've encountered a situation where you thought it was the right time, right place, and you were sure the Lord would bless and fulfill what you longed for, yet it doesn't work out. Maybe it was a time when the natural course of events was taking too long, or not going in the manner you thought they should, and you reacted according to your own wisdom, without prayerfully considering what is the LORD's will. A time when either things

didn't work out at all, or you ended up making them worse. Welcome to Abram and Sarai's world.

Abram & Sarai take matters into their own hands for a son

You know Abram better as "Abraham". But when we first encountered him the LORD had not given him his new name. "Abram", his name at birth, means "exalted father". The LORD directed Abram to leave his place of birth in Mesopotamia and travel to the land of Canaan. He directed Abram and his wife Sarai (as she was originally called) to travel up and down the land and explore it, live in it as sojourners: a temporary resident who has no official home but dwells in a land that is not his own for an extended period of time. That was Abram and Sarai. Yet the LORD repeatedly promised He would give this land to Abram's descendants, who would be as numerous and uncountable as the stars in the sky. Abram heard and believed the LORD's promise, and by that faith he was declared to be in right standing with God.

It's one thing to have that faith. It's entirely another thing to stand strong on that faith as year after anxious year passes by, even though the LORD kept on returning and repeating His promise. Ten years go by from when the LORD first made this promise to Abram. Abram and Sarai are getting older by the year. And with each passing year there it seems less and less likely that this promise will come to fruition. As our text opens Abram is 85 years old and Sarai is 75. Not only is she old, but she is barren. In that culture at that time, to be unable to produce offspring, which was one of the responsibilities of the wife at that time, was a source of frustration and embarrassment to her. She recognizes that it is the LORD that has closed her womb. But her desire is so great she decides it's OK for her and Abram to take matters into their own hands. She offers her young Egyptian slave to Abram, that he might get her pregnant and through her they could start this multitude of descendants God had promised. And Abram, the man of faith, sees that faith falter, and he agrees to Sarai's plan.

It sounded good at the time. And it seemed to work, as Hagar did become pregnant with a male child. Only this meant that in effect Abram took to himself another wife. This flies in the face of God's original design of marriage being one man and one woman, the basic building block for a family. And it doesn't take too long to see Sarai's wisdom is not as wise and good as she thought. Hagar used to be a slave, but she no longer sees herself as a slave since she is carrying Abram's child. She thinks that makes her more of an equal with Sarai, who used to be her mistress. But now she seems to be even more of a wife than Sarai, who can't even conceive for her husband. And instead of serving as Sarai's slave she begins to act

with contempt for her mistress. Sarai complains to Abram, blaming him for allowing this slave woman to act in such an arrogant manner without disciplining her. Abram, instead of handling this situation which both he and Sarai had created, wimps out. He fails to take any responsibility or leadership role and simply tells Sarai that Hagar is her slave, and she has the power to make her toe the line. So, Sarai, in jealous anger, deals harshly with Hagar who in turn flees. So much for this answer to Abram's lack of descendants, or so it seems.

Hagar is not the one the LORD chose to fulfill His promise to Abram through. All three of the parties involved in taking matters into their own hands have sinned against the LORD. He had every right to leave all three of them out to dry and find someone else to establish His covenant and His people through. But the LORD doesn't do that. He comes to Hagar as she flees and lets her know He loves her, and is watching over her, and will indeed bless her with a child who she shall name Ishmael (which means God hears). He will be a wild child of a man, who will be the father of a war-like people that are constantly living at odds with their kinfolk. But the LORD will still watch over him and her and bless them. And then he tells Hagar to return to Abram and Sarai, and continue in her vocation, not as Sarai's equal, but as her slave and submit to her.

Genesis 17:16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

And what of Abram and Sarai and the child the LORD promised? The LORD has not given up on them, even though they gave up on Him. He comes to them again. He gives them new names as symbolic with the new vocational identity He is about to give them. Abram becomes "Abraham"-meaning "father of a multitude" and Sarai name is changed to Sarah which means princess. And the LORD renews His gracious promise to both of them.

Genesis 17:17-18 ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!

Abraham hears this but still struggles to believe. In fact, he seems to tell God the problem of a son has already been addressed by them. He seems to be saying "I hear you LORD, but really? I'm 100 years old and she's 90 years old. And here we already have the child in Ishmael. We've taken care of it. Let him be the one that fulfills your promise.

Genesis 17:19 God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him"

Establishing the promise given to Abraham through Ishmael is not the will and plan of the LORD. The LORD reminds and corrects Abraham; the child will come from Sarah's womb with you as the father. He and His offspring are the ones who the LORD will establish His covenant with to bless them not only with the land, but through one of Isaac's descendants would come the one who would bless the entire world. And to make it abundantly clear that Isaac is the one, the LORD has Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. But the LORD will go with them, save them miraculously from dying in the desert from thirst, and by His hand establish Ishmael as the father of the Arabic people.

The LORD's Hand Establishing the Child of the Promise

And what about God's promise? The LORD miraculously fulfilled it using 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah. Isaac's birth was a miracle, one gladly celebrated by both parents who had their faith renewed in the LORD who always keeps His promise. We see just how strong this faith is when the LORD commands Abraham to take this miraculous child of promise up on top of a mountain and sacrifice him on an altar. And Abraham is ready to so, with knife poised over Isaac, believing so strongly that God would keep his promise, even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead. But it was not the LORD's will that Isaac should die that day.

Isaac would be spared that death, even though it was what his sins deserved. That's because one of His descendants, the One promised who would bless the whole world, that One would take His place and die his death, as well as yours and mine. Jesus is the true miraculous child of promise. He is the One promised to Adam and Eve, to Abraham and Sarah, and to all God's faithful children of the Old Testament. The LORD made Abraham and Sarah wait so long for the birth of Isaac so that he would be a sign pointing to Jesus' even more amazing birth from the virgin Mary. He had no sin that would call for Him to be sacrificed on an altar. Yet He willingly climbed on the sacrificial altar that was the cross, 2,000 years later on that same spot. He died for Isaac's sins, for Abram and Sarah's sins of taking matters into their own hands, and for yours and mine as well.

How many times do we lack faith in God's promise to care for us and bless us? How many times do we look to the work of our own hands, the amount of money in our own bank account, or even our leaders to care for us and provide for us? And yet the LORD has already provided in Christ what you need the most: forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. He sent His only Son to die for you at just the right time. He sent His Spirit into your heart and life at just the right time to grant you the same faith that made Abraham right with God. It's the faith that despite your doubts, and despite all the ways you take matters into your own hands, declares you not just to be in right standing with God, but His special and precious child of the Covenant that is in Jesus body and blood given and shed for you.

Conclusion

I'm sure all of us have those moments when we think now is the perfect time and place for something we desire to happen, yet it does not. Could it be God is not slow to act, but is graciously blessing you by making you wait in order to give you something better to come?

The LORD did not answer my wish to be an SMP Pastor. And looking back I'm so glad He didn't, even though that was not how I felt at the time. If He would've answered my prayer and made me one, I could only serve at my home Church, and only under the supervision on an MDiv Pastor. In other words, I could never have taken the call here. By making me wait and sending me to Seminary to earn an MDiv, He was preparing me for greater things that were beyond what I could see with my limited insight focused only on 'right now'.

How has He done the same thing in your life? How has He, by making you wait, blessed you far beyond what you could've imagined before? In how many ways has He graciously protected, corrected, and even lessened the consequences of hasty decisions you've made. Because of the gift that is the true Child of Promise, Jesus Christ, all our "Ishmael" attempts are forgiven. And He promises to continue to bless us by keeping us in the faith of Abraham, that steadfast faith that looks to His promise of life everlasting. Amen