

Sermon - June 21, 2020
“Is Anything Too Difficult for the Lord?”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Good Morning everyone. Happy Father’s Day and welcome to our live stream service from Afton UMC. Please take a few minutes and type into the comment line a greeting or a Father’s Day wish to all of the fathers that are with us today and give thanks for those who were and are fortunate to have been blessed with a loving father in their lives. Thanks to all who have continued to work to make possible this live stream, and thanks to the musicians who have blessed us throughout this time and who continue to share their gifts with us. I want to remind everyone as you join us on live stream to keep each other in prayer, encourage one another in the Lord with phone calls and use of social media, spend time in the Lord’s word each day, take time to pray, and build upon those fundamentals as a congregation. Let the Holy Spirit guide you to reach out to friends and neighbors throughout the week and share the love of Jesus Christ with one another.

Last week our stop on our journey through the Old Testament was in the Garden of Eden and there we experienced humanity’s fall from a perfect relationship with God. Our journey now has become one that leads us back into a relationship with God, a journey whose endpoint is for humanity to once again be in perfect relationship with God. Let me remind us of some of the other stops that have occurred in this journey that we have skipped over. Abram has responded to God’s call and has left his home and journeyed to the land of Canaan. There God has made a covenant with Abram to make of him a great nation, a nation whose members are as numerous as the sands of the seashore and a nation that will be a blessing to all of the nations of the world. God has made a covenant with Abram and has changed his name to Abraham and Sarai’s name to Sarah. It is through this couple that God will bring about His plan for restoration of the relationship with humanity that was lost in the Garden through Adam’s disobedience. For

restoration to occur, Abraham and Sarah will need to have a son. God has promised an heir, but time has moved on since that promise was made, much time. Years have passed. Abraham has grown old as he waited. He has talked with God about a child, but God's answer has been to wait. Sarah has also grown old and is now many years beyond the age of child bearing. They wait and wonder how and if God will answer their situation. They have hope in God, but their ability to be part of His plan for a great nation seems to have passed them by. They have been blessed by God in many ways here in this new land, but they still lack a son to be the next generation. They have tried other approaches to fulfill God's promise in their understanding of life, and Ishmael, Abraham's son, has been born to Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. But God's plan is for the nations to be blessed through the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, a child of a promise from God.

Abraham is sitting in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day, and he looks up and sees three men standing near him. The sudden appearance of these men puts them into a different category of visitor. They did not come across the fields that surround Abraham in this place or he would have seen them coming in the distance and been prepared for their arrival. Nor has anyone in or associated with Abraham's tent seen them coming and sent word of their pending arrival. Abraham is not overcome with fear at their arrival, but he is overcome with a desire to show them extravagant hospitality. These men have come for a purpose, and Abraham's desire is to bless them through hospitality. Notice the respect he shows them. He runs to where they are and bows to them, welcoming them into his hospitality, immediately asking them to let him serve them some bread and to provide a place to rest from their journey. He offers little, but his hospitality is extravagant, providing a feast for these strangers.

We should take note about the way Abraham treats these men. He does not know who they are or their mission. Abraham's lack of knowledge does not matter. His response to the appearance of strangers close to his tent is to extend hospitality. He does not challenge them by asking them where they are from, what their intent might be, or any other questions. He runs to them and meets them where they are and invites them into his home, his tent, that he might serve them. This is radical hospitality. This is how we as Christians are to be found interacting with those we meet in this life. For many people today, it seems that we have descended into distrust and fear instead of an instant extension of hospitality and love to those who appear at our door.

Now, following Abraham's radical hospitality, the visit abruptly takes a new and interesting direction. All of these strangers inquire about Abraham's wife, Sarah. Don't miss in the text that this is the focus of all of the strangers. Sarah is now the focus of their visit. Resting and refreshment are done, now is the time for business. The question that the group asks is "Where is your wife Sarah?" We should also notice that they ask about her by name, not by some generic expression such as "Where is your wife?" These strangers, who have appeared and feasted, know who Sarah is, even though she is not present at the table. Now I will admit that these three men could have stopped some other person on the road and asked who lives in the tent under the oak and probably been told that Abraham and Sarah live there. That does not seem to be the case as I read the text. These men have appeared with knowledge of those whom they have come to visit. It is at this point we begin to think that they may be more than three strange men. Who these three men are has been and is a topic of much discussion in the church. Some hold that a preincarnate Jesus is one of the three, others that they are three angels, messengers of God. Who they are is not our focus this morning. That they bring a message to Abraham and Sarah from God is our focus instead. We should recall that God has made a covenant with Abraham to make of him a great nation, a nation that will be a blessing to all of the nations of the world. One of the three strangers delivers a message from God to Abraham and to Sarah who is listening through the walls of the tent and no doubt has begun to listen more carefully when she hears her name mentioned by the group. God's promise requires a child, and one of the men tells Abraham and Sarah, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." Did you catch the one's words? God is telling Abraham and Sarah that they will now, in their old age, have a son. The messenger from God tells them God's promise to Abraham (which includes Sarah) will now be fulfilled with the arrival of a child in a few months. Now I have to wonder, if some of the more mature ladies listening had gone to a doctor's appointment for a check-up and been told that you were going to have a child, what would your response be? Would you laugh? Would you consider your age and your body and wonder what the doctor was thinking? Would you get a second opinion? Would you believe your doctor? Would you laugh? Sarah is listening and hears the words come from the one who speaks to her situation. Sarah knows how old she is (and we think she is about 90), she knows her body, she is aware that her days for bearing a child have long since gone by, and her response is to laugh to herself and say to herself in her heart, "After I have grown old, and my

husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” This news is shocking and goes against all she understands about herself and life. These words will not come to pass in her understanding. They are beyond what she understands. These are words that would require God to act, to enter into Abraham’s and Sarah’s situation and show Himself strong and bring forth a child where in our understanding no child is possible.

Notice that in the response in the text that it is now the LORD, Yahweh, who speaks. The one speaking speaks for God. He asks why Sarah laughed at God’s message of a coming child. And then he states, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” God has heard Sarah’s response of laughter, and while in fear she may deny she laughed, that does not matter. God is now going to act through Sarah and Abraham and bring forth the child of promise. This is the child that will lead to Abraham’s descendants becoming a great nation, a nation that will bless all the nations of the world. God speaks through the “one” present a second time, “At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” The promise will be fulfilled, Abraham and Sarah will have a son, the birth of a son is not far off in time. Through people, Abraham and Sarah, God has chosen to provide an heir, a son. God moves forward through people. We have heard Sarah’s response to these words, but we need to notice that Abraham is silent. He chooses to believe and be before God as one who believes even if the promise requires God’s hand to be shown in their physical bodies. If he has doubts, he does not voice them. He is silent and is simply before this messenger of God whose words are almost too wonderful to accept and hold. A son will be born to them in due season in a few months. In our journey with God’s people, we will not stop for the birth of Isaac. As the messenger of God promised, Isaac is born in due season. Sarah and Abraham are given a son, a son of promise, a promise kept by God, even when it seems to us that the time for fulfilment of the promise has passed by. God is faithful and keeps His promises. Isaac, whose name means laughter in Hebrew, is born in due season and grows up in this family. We will pick up part of Isaac’s story next week.

Before we leave this morning’s text, let’s spend just a few minutes on the question asked by one of the strangers who came to visit Abraham with a message from God, “Is anything too wonderful for God?” If we will be honest with ourselves, I think we will find this question difficult. We may agree that God can do anything, but do we live our lives in a manner that counts on God to do wonderful things in our lives? Do we expect God to heal us when we are ill? Do we expect God to protect us when a deadly virus is loose among the world? Do we expect

God to calm the violence in a riot and keep us safe? Do we turn to God to bring peace to difficult situations? Do we expect God to bring about needed changes in us so that He may show himself strong in the world? Do we expect God's will to be done for us? Do we limit God? Do we expect God to show Himself strong in our lives? How do we think of God? Can God change us? Can God still the storms in our lives? Will God act? How long will we wait for God? Till there is no hope?

Our need to look at this statement from the one stranger, a messenger of God, goes beyond an ancient story of God providing through His people another step in the journey to restore all people to a perfect relationship with God. We need to ask ourselves questions such as, "Do we expect God to answer our prayers? Do we expect God to act in our lives? Do we live as if God must act for our situation to be made whole? Do we laugh at the reality of our situation, or do we trust in God to do what he has said he will do? Do we live our lives, have we lived our lives, in a manner that we cannot be successful unless God pours out the Holy Spirit and enables us to be successful?"

There is a long story line between Isaac and Jesus. And we are going to hear some of it again this summer. But let us not forget that Isaac is born, God's promise is kept, and the story of God's people moves on. God does not go away and leave humanity alone, but enters into their story through a people chosen by God, and that story continues on through a faithful God who acts with steadfast love that leads in the end to the arrival of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, who arrives in the fullness of time to begin to bring in the kingdom of God. This is our story, the story of the people of God. It is a story that we need to be telling to others through words and deeds such as radical hospitality. But it is more than that. We need to be God's people, living out our lives in the places he has called us with the tests of life we receive, as a people who are known as those who respond to all life's challenges by living out the words of God's messenger, "Nothing is too difficult for our God." Nothing. Does that mean that all we receive in life are blessings? Does that mean that we know the mind of God and our expectations are God's? God makes a way through the cross for us to be reconciled to Him, a way to be brought back into a perfect relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus leaves us with a promise that he will return again, and until he does, he tells us in Matthew 28:20, "I will be with you always, to the end of the age." In Christ is our hope and trust. In Christ's presence all of the promises of God are completed. He is with us until the end of the age. Let us go forth

into his mission to all people and tell them our story, the story of a God for whom nothing is too difficult.

Pray with me: Father God, I confess that I have not lived as one who believes that nothing is too difficult for you. Father, I confess that I have not always waited on you for your time to come and need you to come and heal my hurts, scars, and brokenness. Help me to live life anew this day in the presence of Jesus Christ who is with us until the end of the age. Guide us to go forth into Jesus' mission to all the world as the people of a God for whom nothing is too difficult. Lead us, Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit to be those who are a blessing to all people. Amen.