

Midweek Meditation, August 26, 2020

Genesis 21:1-13

Abraham # 11

In this 21 chapter, we come to a milestone event in the life of Abraham and Sarah; the birth of Isaac. Now Abraham and Sarah have spent, probably, about 20 years waiting for this promise of a child. They have looked at their own human frailty, and doubted that a 90 and a 100-year-old could possibly be blessed with a child between them. They have, at any number of instances, pointed out to God that they were beyond the age of child-bearing. They tried to substitute their own wisdom, for what they thought to be, the shortcomings of God's promise. Sarah told Abraham to go and be with her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, and then, the birth of a child in that union, would fulfill God's promise to them. And later, Abraham asked for a contract, or a covenant, so that he would be sure of God's promise. And after all of this turmoil and struggle and doubt, the time has come for the birth of Isaac, the child that God had promised to Abraham and Sarah. The scripture says that God was gracious to Sarah. In spite of her doubt, she has now come to know the blessing of bearing a child. God did for Sarah, what he had promised. She became pregnant, and bore a son to Abraham, and they named him Isaac, and according to God's command. When Isaac was eight days old, he was circumcised according to God's command. It is interesting, Sarah says that God has brought me laughter. Literally, God brought laughter to Sarah because the meaning of the name Isaac is, "He will laugh", or simply "laughter". Over the chapters we have studied, at one point, in Genesis 17:17, when God is talking to Abraham, the scriptures says that Abraham fell face down and laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man 100 years old." And similarly, in Genesis 18-12, Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "after I am worn out, and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" And she is talking about God's promise about the birth of a Son. So now, I guess God has a sense of humor, because he is true to his promise. Isaac, which means laughter, has been brought into the lives of Abraham and Sarah. And I believe that God did it this way, so that there could be no other explanation for the birth of Isaac. The possibility of this birth was viewed to be so impossible by Sarah and Abraham, that it was laughable. And it was viewed to be impossible by all those around them too. The only way that the birth of Isaac is possible; the only way that Isaac's birth is

believable, is if we remember the question that God asked Abraham and Sarah. And that question is, in Genesis 18-14, "Is there anything that is too hard for God?" God clearly answers that question with the birth of Isaac. And the answer is, "no." There is nothing too hard for God. Sarah goes on to say, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet, I have born him a son in his old age." And the answer to Sarah's question is that only God; God and God alone, would have made this promise to Abraham, because there is nothing too hard for God. That was true in the time of Abraham and Sarah, and I believe that it is true for you and me, and our church, and our world as well. There is something else about what Sarah says that is worth pointing out. She says, "Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." He is 100 but she is over 90. Notice that she points out his old age, but she doesn't say anything about her old age. I am just saying.

Now, the next part of chapter 21, I think, is predictable. Now that the promised son, Isaac, has come along, what are we going to do with Ishmael? You may remember that Ishmael was actually the result of Sarah's plan to give God's promise some help. Because in Sarah's mind, God's promise was a bit ridiculous; her giving birth to a child? She had been barren her whole life, and was now, way past the time when a child was even physically possible. So, she substitutes her wisdom for God's. She tells Abraham to take Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant, and make her your wife. The child from that union, Ishmael, will surely be the fulfillment of God's promise. Well, Sarah's wisdom was not God's wisdom. And Abraham and Sarah, and Hagar and eventually Ishmael found that out. So now, here we are. And the awkward question still stands. What are we going to do with Ishmael? He is Abraham's first-born son. So why wouldn't he be the heir to Abraham's land? Well, as the story goes, as Isaac grows, Sarah spots Ishmael, the son born to Hagar, mocking. Presumably he is mocking Isaac, but the scripture does not say that. But what older brother does not mock the younger brother? Anyway, Sarah is having none of it. She feels threatened by Ishmael. She says, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Now Abraham is distressed about this, because, Ishmael is Abraham's son, even though he is not Sarah's son. He turns to God for answers, or perhaps God

comes to Abraham with an answer. And God says to Abraham, listen to Sarah. Do not be distressed. In her own imperfect way, and for the wrong reasons, Sarah is correct. Ishmael is not heir to this inheritance. Only Isaac is. God assures Abraham that He will provide for Ishmael and Hagar. God says, I will make Ishmael into a nation also, because he is your offspring. So, Abraham is forced to take a leap of faith. He sends Hagar and his first-born son, Ishmael, off on what was to be their destiny in God's plan. God took care of them, provided for them and preserved them to take the place that they were ordained to take in God's plan.

It is interesting, this milestone, the birth of Isaac, has a little bit of an awkward transition. Looking at Sarah, she seems to be letting bitterness, regret and envy, cause her to inject cruelty into a situation that was clearly of her own making. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael as a result of Sarah's directive, and Sarah's doubt in God's promise. So, now she orders Abraham to get rid of them. Yet out of the imperfection of Sarah's way of handling this situation, God's plan is furthered. Abraham is in an awkward and difficult place too. He is not sure what to do. He wants to honor his beloved Sarah. He wants to affirm God's promise of this chosen child Isaac. But he loves Ishmael. Ishmael is his first-borne. God gives Abraham a real test of faith. Go ahead, send him and his mother out into the desert wilderness with limited food and water. Don't worry about them, I will take care of them. I will make them into a nation also. How hard would that be. Your son and his mother, just wandering the desert of Beersheba, forever cut off from your wealth and provision. But Abraham couldn't afford to doubt God now. God said he would provide for Hagar and Ishmael. He must have asked the question, "Is there anything too hard for God?" as they walked away with a bit of food and water. It seems cruel, but it is really a test of faith that almost rivals the test of faith that is still to come for Abraham. But again, what seems cruel on the surface, to us, who are reading this text, turns out to be the fulfillment of God's plan. Ishmael had his place. And It was not with Sarah and Abraham.

This story of Hagar and Ishmael getting sent off might sound familiar. They were sent off in a similar way in Genesis 16. But that time, God sent Hagar and Ishmael back to Sarah, and told Hagar to be obedient to her master Sarah. God plan,

God's time and God's purpose were fulfilled the first time and the second time that Hagar and Ismael were sent away. I think that there is a lesson in this passage and it repeats itself in a number of the passages we have shared up until now. Sometimes following God's will creates fear, and doubt inside us. Sometimes following God's will means making hard decisions. Sometimes following God's will means that we are separated from the ones we love. For Example, Abram and his father, Terrah; Abraham and Lot: and now Abraham and Ishmael. Imagine Abraham standing there on the brink of the desert, watching your first-born wandering away, because you ordered him to leave. Yet God's will is accomplished. Sometimes, God's will takes a shape different than we expect. Sometimes God's will is accomplished, not because of us, but in spite of us. Such is the case in Sarah's bitterness and envy toward Hagar and Ismael. The feelings and the motives for her order to send Hagar and Ismael away were not motivated by a sincere desire on her part to Honor God by Lovingly nurturing all those around her. She was scared that she and her son were either going to have to share their inheritance, or worse yet they would be elbowed out all together. Yet God's plan was furthered by what she did. Not because of her, but in spite of her. In fact, Abraham and Sarah are here in this time and place celebrating their son's birth, not because they have faithfully trusted in God's promise in every phase, but rather, in spite of their doubts and questions. The same holds true for Peter and James and John. They end up as Jesus trusted disciples in spite of their doubts and betrayal. And the same is true for you and me. When thinking about Isaac's birth, I ask, Is anything too hard for God. The answer was, "no." In Jesus time, a baby was born in a manger to a virgin. Is anything too hard for God. No. And, what about our time? We are in a hard, difficult time. Will we ever be delivered from this pandemic. I believe that we will. Is there anything too hard for God? Let us pray