

THE MESSAGE for Aug 21, 2011

Isaiah 51:1-6

Abraham and Sarah... Beyond Our Imagination

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Story: Bill's 84-year-old mother maintained her independence and insisted on living alone in the old family homestead. Her 4 children lived in the same town, but she rarely called them except in emergencies. So it was with some apprehension that Bill drove to her house one morning after she called him on the phone. When he arrived, she said she suspected that there was a burglar in her bedroom closet, since she had heard noises in there the night before.

"Why didn't you call me last night?" Bill exclaimed.

"Well," she replied, "it was late and I hated to bother you, so I just nailed the closet door shut and went to bed."

That's an example of faith. A faith that nails the door of doubt shut and then calmly leaves the rest to God. That's the kind of faith the Bible tells us Abraham and Sarah had.

Do you know what the most common phrase is in the Bible? It's this: "*Do not be afraid.*" That phrase appears 365 times in the Bible – one time for each day of the year. *Do not be afraid.* That's what the Bible tells us. Why? Because God is with us and with God nothing is impossible.

Today we continue with God's story through great people and today we consider the story of Abraham and Sarah. We can describe their story with one word... *Faith.*

Here are a few acronyms for FAITH (on the screen):

* Full Assurance In Trusting Him.

* Fear Ain't In This House.

* Fantastic Adventure In Trusting Him. That one describes Abraham and Sarah.

It was by faith that Abraham and Sarah lived their lives and what an adventure it was. I want to point out four key moments of faith in their lives.

First key moment of faith, a name change.

Abraham was originally called Abram. Abram means, "exalted father" (ironic he was childless until he was in his 80's). His name was changed to Abraham when God promised to make him the father of many nations (thereby putting the "Ha!" in Abram). Abraham means, "father of a multitude."

Sarah was originally called Sarai which means "palace" or "home." The name Sarah means "princess."

Changing their names reflected the new life and the new calling they received from God. Abraham the father of many nations married to Sarah a princess. How appropriate (*See Genesis 17*).

When I left Bedford, PA to answer God's call for ministry my name changed from Robbie to Rob. It reflects the new life I live as a servant of Christ. To this day people in my home town still call me Robbie. I received a letter for my 30th year class reunion from High School and it was addressed "Robbie Miller."

A name change is significant especially for someone who answers God's call like Abraham and Sarah.

Second, key moment of faith. God said "go" and they went.

Abraham and Sarah were living with his family in the city of Ur, in Babylonia. One day, God spoke to Abraham saying, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land I will show you" (*see Genesis 12*).

Can you imagine? Abraham is 75-years-old when God calls him to leave everything and go. It took a lot of faith to do what he did, even more so for Sarah. All Sarah had known her entire life was polytheism and idolatry in Babylon. She never heard of this God that spoke to her husband.

What would you do if your husband or wife came home one day after fifty-some years of marriage and when you asked about their day, they said, "Well, honey, God appeared to me today and said we need to pack up all our stuff and hit the road!"

You might respond with, "What!? You got to be kidding me. Where are we going!?"

"I don't know," your spouse shrugs. "God will tell us when we get there."

"Yeah right?!?!"

Sounds crazy doesn't it. It probably sounded crazy to Sarah. She really didn't know God at this time, but she was willing to step out in faith with her husband.

Did I mention that Abraham was 75-years-old when God called him to pick up, pack up, and head out to an unknown, underdeveloped place. God says, "Leave everything safe and familiar. Leave your old values, your old priorities, your old identities. Leave all your old gods. Leave all of it behind. I am sending you to be a blessing to others." And they went. That's faith.

Do you trust God like that? Is God asking you to leave anything? Any idol? Any sin? Any fear? Any bad habits? Is God asking you to go someplace? Take on a new area of ministry? Some new adventure in your life of faith? Is God calling you to go and be a blessing to someone somehow?

Just think how life would be different if Abraham and Sarah stayed in a safe and comfortable place.

Third, key moment of faith, living into God’s promise.

God told Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. But there’s one small problem. He didn’t have any children and he is in his 80s, and Sarah, his beautiful wife, is in her 70s. She is what the Bible calls barren, and this is seen as a shameful curse.

So Sarah comes up with a plan. After living in Canaan for ten years, she decides to give her maidservant Hagar to Abraham. She tells Abraham to sleep with Hagar, and have a baby with her. He does and she does. She conceives (*see Genesis 16*). While this is culturally acceptable at the time, it causes some massive problems as it always has, and still does today.

Things didn’t go quite the way Sarah had planned. She ended up being hateful and resentful of Hagar and her son Ishmael. She demands that Abraham send them both away—kicking them out of the house and onto the street. I’m sure Sarah thought things would go differently. This lack of patience on her part has led to thousands of years of fighting and feuding between the descendant of Ishmael (Arabs) and the descendant of Isaac (Israelis).

Hagar gives birth to Ishmael when Abraham is 86-years-old. This was not God’s plan. This is another example of humankind thinking there’s a way that’s better than God’s way. Ever do that? Ever think your plan is better than God’s plan? God comes back to Abraham with some clarity about the original plan.

When Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 89, God says, “You will be the father of many nations, and you will have a son by Sarah, your wife, and you will be my people and I will be your God!” Just imagine being Abraham, and hearing that. “Yeah Right!” We often say that in our family when we hear something unbelievable.

So God says, “There’s going to be a sign.” Signs were very important in those days. Covenants often had a sign to support the promise, and God says that this covenant will have one too. God says to Abraham, “I want you to be circumcised!” Imagine Abraham hearing that! He’s starting to scratch his head and rethink this whole deal. “Noah got a rainbow for a sign! I get circumcision - hummmmm?”

Can you hear him explaining that one to Sarah? He comes home one day and says “Well, God spoke to me again.”

“Yeah, what did he say?”

“Well, he’s given me a sign of the covenant we share.”

“Yeah, what’s the sign?”

“Well... it’s circumcision.”

“It’s what?”

“He wants me to cut of the foreskin of my... “

“I know what it is – why?”

“Well I guess because God wants us to cut off anything that gets in the way of an intimate relationship with him.”

“Ohhhhhh”

Of course, the Bible doesn't tell us how that conversation went or if it ever happened between Abraham and Sarah. It simply tells us “Abraham obeyed God that very day” (see *Genesis 7:23*).

Abraham and Sarah were not perfect nor was their faith perfect. They both laugh at God's promise when he said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” We learn that Sarah is listening in on the conversation.

She is way past childbearing age. She thinks and laughs to herself, “After my body is worn out and my husband is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Yeah right! Her words are full of sarcasm. She is 89! Abraham is 99! No way! 25 years after God said they would be parents. God reminds them again of the promise. There are no fertility drugs. How can this be?

God says to Abraham, “Why does Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?” When confronted about laughing Sarah is afraid, so she lies: “I did not laugh.” And God replies: “Oh yes, you did.”

Uhmhhh, excuse me but --- who wouldn't laugh?

Abraham and Sarah have their doubts – who wouldn't? They wonder how can these things be, yet they hold on to God's promise. A year later, their son is born. God tells them to name the child Isaac, which means “he laughs.”

God has a great sense of humor....

Everyone laughs because in this story a child is born in the geriatric ward with Medicare picking up the tab.

Everyone laughs because Sarah is the only woman at Dutch Way picking up Pampers and Depends at the same time.

Everyone laughs because Sarah buys strained vegetables for the whole family, because no one has any teeth.

Picture her standing in the checkout line and someone asks if the beautiful baby she is holding is her grandchild or great grandchild – and she said proudly. “Oh it's mine. I'm the mother.” “Yeah right, that's funny. Hey Betty, get this – this old woman over here says she is the mother of this child. Come check it out.”

Everyone who hears this story will laugh, so God says, “Name the child ‘he laughs.’”

In the midst of this story is this little line. I don't want you to miss it, "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" That's a key question when it comes to living the faith. We too are children of Abraham and we need to answer that question for ourselves. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*

Fourth, key moment of faith

One day Abraham is looking at his son Isaac, perhaps wondering if he will live long enough to see grandchildren. God speaks to him reminding him of the promise that he will be the father of many nations.

Then God says Abraham I have another job for you. Go sacrifice your one and only son, Isaac. Can you imagine? Abraham is now 115-years-old. Isaac is around 15 just about old enough to start a family and God says sacrifice him to me. So Abraham prepares to do just that, he gathers the wood, ties up his one and only son and just as he is about to do the deed an angel appears and tells him not to sacrifice the boy but to sacrifice a ram that was stuck in the bushes instead -- hence the start of offering a sacrificial lamb in worship.

Many years later another Father will offer up another Son as the sacrifice of all sacrifices – Jesus. He has become the sacrificial lamb for all of us. Doing so and he conquered death so that we might have life. Jesus is the sacrifice lamb who took our place on the cross. Now we can be a living sacrifice to God. Living our lives by faith for Jesus' sake.

Do you have doubts? Do you ever wonder about this faith stuff? Do you ever question God's plan for your life? Abraham and Sarah sure did and their faith grew every day. They lived into God's promise of life every day.

Their story reminds us that nothing is too difficult for God. God is in the business of making a way where there appears to be no way. And that way is often beyond our imagination. And yet it's true – nothing is too difficult for God. Amen.