

SUNDAY, JUNE 20, 2010

Sunday, June 20, 2010: Father Abraham

Father Abraham
Genesis 18: 1 – 15.

I. Introduction.

Today is Fathers' Day. The day we set aside to thank God for our fathers. I have to admit, I like having a day for fathers. After all, I am a father...And I like the idea that my three children will be required to acknowledge me at least one day a year for the rest of their lives.

Of course we all know that Mothers' Day is a bigger deal than Fathers' Day. It can be unsettling for us fathers to feel that Mothers' Day has pushed our special day to the side. But, don't worry fathers. I am here to help.

Mothers get one very special day every year. Fathers get one kind of special day every year.

But did you know that February 14 – 20 of this year was National Pancake Week? It is observed every year to coincide with Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday (<http://www.answers.com/topic/national-pancake-week>)...

The first week of August is recognized as National Clown Week (www.nationalclownweek.org)...

May 21 – 31 of this year was International Pickle Week...Pickles must be very important since International Pickle Week lasts a full ten days (www.pickleweek.com)...

However, pickles are not as important as peanuts. The entire month of March is National Peanut Month (www.peanutbutterlovers.com)...

Now don't you feel better? Mothers may outrank fathers, but even mothers are outranked by peanuts, pancakes, pickles and clowns...

Just a few weeks ago, I stood up to preach a Mothers' Day sermon and apologized to you. I am not a mother, so I don't think I am the right person to preach a Mothers' Day sermon. Today is Fathers' Day, so you would think I have a lot to say. Again, I am a father. I have three children—a five year old, a twelve year old and an almost fifteen year old. Surely I am the right person to preach a Fathers' Day sermon.

Not so fast, my friend...If there is anything I have learned about being a father it is this: the older my children get, the less I know about being a father. I am not going to hold myself up as an example. I prefer to find an example from the Bible.

There is one man in the Bible we naturally associate with being a father. It is Abraham, whose name actually means "father of nations."

An amazing fact about Father Abraham is the way his life really wasn't a good example of a perfect

father. Abraham doubted God and devised a contingency plan to name his slave Eliezer as his heir. Abraham doubted God and laughed when God told him he would have a son in his old age. Abraham doubted God and went along with his wife's contingency plan to have a child with Sarah's maid.

I find this amazing for two reasons. First, if the Bible had told us only one story from Abraham's life we would not hold up Abraham as our hero. His life was filled with bad choices and laughing in the face of God's promises. Second, the entire Abraham story is a story about faithfulness. The individual stories about Abraham are stories of faithlessness. But the entire story of Abraham is a story of faithfulness.

There is only one thing that can change our faithlessness into faithfulness. It is the grace of God. Abraham's story is more about God and his grace than it is about Abraham and his faithfulness. Perhaps we all need to hear that message today. But, I think it is especially appropriate for the fathers in our church. You might not feel like the perfect father, the perfect mother or even the perfect Christian. But, if you are a Christian, then God is at work in your life. God, in his grace, is using your imperfections to write a story that is bigger than you are. It is God's own story...The story of God's grace. You may feel more like a sinner than a saint. You may think you are faithless instead of faithful. But the entire story demonstrates how God worked in your life and used you. We just cannot see it right now...Because the story of God's grace has not ended.

Read Genesis 18: 1 – 15.

The story begins by sharing some inside information with the readers. The first words of verse one are the words **“The LORD appeared to Abraham.”** You and I know a secret that Abraham does not know. We know this is an encounter with the LORD himself. Abraham thinks it is an encounter with three strangers.

However, this secret does not prevent Abraham from doing the right thing. Ancient Near Eastern culture placed a high priority on hospitality to strangers. Treating strangers with respect was simply the right thing to do. So, Abraham did three things for his guests. He brought them water to drink. He brought them water to wash their feet. He prepared a feast fit for a king. He did all of this before he ever knew this was an encounter with God.

It is interesting to me to notice where this encounter took place. Verse one tells us, **“The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre.”** If you go back through the story of Abraham, you will see that Mamre was an important place. This was the place where Abraham worshipped the LORD.

Most of us would love to have an encounter with God like this. In Abraham's encounter with God, God reiterated his promises. God gave Abraham a timeline. God even guaranteed his own power and ability to bring about his promises to Abraham. Would you like to receive the same kind of guidance from God? Would you like to have God's assurance for your faith?

Perhaps there is a lesson for us about the place where we worship the Lord. Abraham encountered God and received assurance of faith in the place where he worshipped God. He wasn't out fishing on the lake. He wasn't playing golf on a Sunday. He wasn't at a softball tournament. Abraham was in a place of worship when God appeared to him.

II. Why Did Sarah Laugh?

I think Abraham's first clue that he was talking to God came in **verse 9**. One of the three strangers asked Abraham, "**Where is your wife Sarah?**" This is very subtle, but it is important. How did the stranger know the name of Abraham's wife? Not only did he know her name, but he knew her new name. In Genesis 17, God changed her name from Sarai to Sarah. The stranger is obviously God, because he knew her new name.

The next verse is not so subtle. The stranger actually tells Abraham that he is God with the words, "**I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.**" Only God has the power to grant a child. Only God has the ability to look into the future and predict when Abraham and Sarah will have that child.

Sarah overheard this prediction and did the reasonable thing. She laughed. But, I want you to notice how Sarah laughed. Verse 12 tells us that she did not laugh out loud. She laughed to herself. Abraham did not hear her laugh. But God heard her laugh. God knows what goes on in the privacy of our hearts. Nothing escapes God's attention.

There are several reasons why people laugh. The most common is the discovery of something unexpected. This is what makes a joke funny. We laugh when the end of the story is not what we expected it to be. We also laugh when other people's misfortune makes us feel superior. It's a way we express, "Wow. I'm glad that didn't happen to me." We even laugh to express our overwhelming sense of joy or happiness in the moment. But there is also the laughter of disbelief. We laugh when someone tells us something so absurd that we know it is impossible. This is why Sarah laughed about having a baby. This was not the laughter of joy or of anticipating an unexpected ending. Sarah laughed because this was absurd. There was no human way for her to have a baby. It was impossible, and she knew it.

Verse 11 tells us that Sarah had three strikes against her. She was old. She was well advanced in years. She was past the age of childbearing. Sarah had every right to laugh at this prediction, because it was impossible.

Faith is believing God can do the impossible. Think about the birth of Jesus and why we celebrate Christmas. A young, unmarried virgin named Mary was visited by an angel. The angel told Mary she was pregnant with the Son of God. This is not possible. It is impossible...But it was God's plan.

Or consider the first twelve men Jesus called to be his disciples. They were uneducated fishermen and unscrupulous tax collectors. Yet, Jesus pulled these twelve men to the side and taught them about the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees and the Jewish religious leaders could not believe Jesus would choose such uneducated and non-religious men. Again, in their minds it was impossible...But this was God's plan.

Or think about the crucifixion of Jesus. When the Jews listened to Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God, it sounded like Jesus was making claims to be equal to God. Of course, that is exactly what Jesus claimed to be. He was the virgin-born Son of God. So, the Jews handed Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified by professional executioners. The men who crucified Jesus were experts. This was their job. There was no one in the world better at guaranteeing the death of a prisoner. Jesus died on the cross NOT to make resurrection possible. Jesus died so that resurrection would be impossible...Because this was God's plan.

After the resurrection of Jesus, the same group of uneducated and non-religious men began preaching the Gospel to all nations. Then, the impossible happened. Men, women, slaves, free, Jews and Gentiles trusted in Jesus as Lord. The church was born and exploded in growth. A multi-racial, intergenerational movement began. God once again did the impossible by tearing down the walls that divide humans from one another.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. Jesus—the virgin-born Son of God, who died and rose again—promised that he will come back to take us to be with him in heaven. Jesus makes the same promise to you today that he made to his original twelve disciples. If you will just receive God’s free gift of salvation, you can be forgiven of your sins, reunited with God, live an abundant life on earth, find meaningful relationships with other people in a multi-racial, intergenerational church, and have eternal life in heaven. Nothing we believe as Christians is possible. Everything we believe as Christians is impossible.

Christian faith goes against everything that is reasonable and acceptable. Faith is the opposite of common sense and worldly values. Faith is not normal. It is believing that God powerful and able to do the impossible.

III. Is Anything too Hard for the LORD?

Notice God’s question to Abraham and Sarah in **Genesis 18: 14**, “**Is anything too hard for the LORD?**”

This is not a rhetorical question. This is a question that demands an answer. Abraham and Sarah must answer this question. ... But...They do not answer. The question is left hanging. There are several places in the Bible where we find unanswered questions. And in every unanswered question, I think the question is left unanswered so we can supply the answer. How will you answer the question?

If you say “Yes. There are things that are too hard for God.” Then, your god is not the God of the Bible. Perhaps your god is your family: your husband, your wife, your parents, your children. And, yes there are some things in life that are too hard for your family to accomplish. Perhaps your god is your money, or at least your ability to make money. And, yes there are many things in life that are too hard and money cannot buy. Perhaps your god is your self. If you don’t know this already, there are many things you cannot do for yourself.

Another way to think of this is to use the phrase “practical atheist.” Many Christians are practical atheists. You profess that you believe in God...You profess that Jesus is the Son of God who died and rose again...You profess that Jesus is the Lord of your life...But you live as if there are some things God cannot do. There are habits God cannot break. There are temptations God cannot overcome. There is pain God cannot heal. There are relationships God cannot reconcile. There are troubles from which God cannot deliver.

That is not my God. That is not the God who created the universe. That is not the God who gave a son to 100 year old Abraham and 90 year old Sarah. That is not the God who raised Jesus from the dead and is coming back to take all believers to heaven.

The right answer is “No. There nothing too hard for God.” My God is the God who does the impossible.

IV. Conclusion.

What are you withholding from God? Is there something in your life that seems impossible?

This is what the Gospel is all about. God can do in your life and in your family what you cannot do for yourself.