

“Promises, Promises”

July 2, 2017

In the Beginning: (God’s) Family Drama series – 4th July weekend, VBS wrap-up

MEDIA: Abraham’s words to God: *You told me long ago...but my skies are still clear. How long must I wait?*

There’s a “Family Circus” cartoon where the young girl, Dolly, is standing with her hand over her heart. The caption says, “...one nation under God, invisible...” She says “invisible” rather than “indivisible.” Is God invisible? Is that how we view God? For some, that may be a felt reality. God is out of sight, hard to see, difficult to experience. Perhaps that’s a feeling that Abraham and Sarah had, too.

Abraham means “*father of many*” in Hebrew. We claim Christian roots in him, and Jews and Muslims also claim a connection to him. Over half of the world population traces faith roots back to him.

Just like Noah, Abraham isn’t perfect. He’s not sinless, but he is righteous. His willingness to step out in faith, to trust, to go with God is admirable.

His story starts with a call from God to go to the unknown. He is a risk-taker. He’s called to be a blessing to the whole world. Today we see that faith also involves looking for God, being ready to serve God, and yes, even waiting on God’s promises.

In spite of everything that looked like it wasn’t going his way, Abraham had deep faith. Even when he had to leave his hometown and when Lot took the good land. Even when God told him in a dream of the struggles that were ahead for his future family. Even when that promise of a child seemed ridiculous because Sarah had been unable to conceive. He even laughed at that! Even when he had to rescue Lot from destruction.

Abraham was part of a covenant - a partner with God. We don’t use the word *covenant* much now - maybe we don’t always think in those same terms anymore. Covenant has to do with promising something; it’s a give-and-take situation. It’s not a contract, but rather a pact. God invites us into covenant, and we decide whether to accept or reject it.

The covenant presented to Abraham in Genesis 12 is a reward covenant. God pledges offspring, land, blessings, and protection to Abraham. Abraham’s part is to be loyal to God alone, to love God, and to go with God.

But in the midst of the covenant, Abraham isn’t without moral backsliding. He lies to Pharaoh about Sarah’s identity. The two of them try to work out the promise of offspring themselves by using Hagar to bear a son, Ishmael. And then there’s jealousy

on Sarah's part. Our family tree is filled with personal stories that make even the most Hollywood films look tame!

Yet, Abraham believes God will do what God will do. God keeps them as partners in the covenant. Abraham follows through on sacrifices to seal the covenant with God. And the sign of circumcision is yet another part of the covenant. God sees Abraham as righteous.

In this encounter in Genesis 18, we see an example of Abraham's righteousness. His treatment of the three visitors – strangers to him – is important. First, it's cultural. In ancient society, hospitality was expected. It was engrained. It was thought that the gods visited humans in human form to test their virtue. Perhaps this is a test of Abraham's character or simply a way that God chooses to communicate the promise to Sarah. **SHOW RUBLEV icon**

Whatever it is, hospitality is more than just a cultural reaction to visitors. The visitors represent the presence of God, and so Abraham's attention to them shows his openness to God. There's a great verse in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews (13:2) where the writer encourages the community not to forget to entertain strangers because it just might be that we're entertaining angels without knowing it.

We're not rewarded for hospitality. It is and should be central to our faith in God. It should be our reaction and response to how God welcomes us. How far does God go to welcome us? How far should we go to welcome others?

How does hospitality show the grace of God to others? One writer issued a challenge for churches: does our congregation think of itself as a fellowship of forgiven sinners? Do we recognize the power of God's welcome in our lives? Think about it. If we do, then how does our attitude change toward others?

Are we living out Abraham's brand of hospitality? He offers his best for these visitors – making fresh bread, bringing water for them to wash up, and cooking up good meat. He gives out of his heart.

Throughout Scripture, hospitality is a way of honoring God. Jesus talks about welcoming the stranger and caring for those in need. But we've become suspect of hospitality. We say we're giving too much and not demanding enough out of people. Stranger and enemy are sometimes synonymous. We insulate ourselves instead of pushing our comfort zones.

One of the first mission trips I ever took was to Detroit. I was in middle school. We stayed at a parsonage and worked at a soup kitchen. And wouldn't you know it? After we had served, they actually wanted us to eat there with the people we had served rather than going to McDonald's! It was a lesson in hospitality – opening myself enough to experience a connection to others.

The encounter that Abraham and Sarah have is also a moment of great humanity. God has repeated the promise of offspring, land, blessings, and protection twice. God knows we need that repetition! This time, it's for Sarah's benefit. Abraham and Sarah welcome the guests, but will they welcome their words, too? Can they move beyond their limited view of the future? Can they welcome God's promises for their lives?

How many of us have laughed at God's plan? That's one of my favorite parts of this passage because it's so human. Do you ever question that God is actually closely involved in your human affairs? Have you ever asked – *does God even care about me? Yeah, the promises sound good – eternal life and hope and comfort, but God, will you deliver on them?*

We walk around not expecting God to act in our lives. Some call it “functional deism” – we believe in God's existence, but we never expect God to meddle. It makes for timid faith in a tiny God.

Our skepticism of God following through hinders us from fully experiencing God's promises. God *is* actively engaged with us – sending people into our lives at the right times, showing us where we can respond with kindness, asking us to act and react to situations with justice, calling us to make peace among ourselves and others. And that opens up the future to new possibilities!

We serve a great, living God. We have to be patient, willing to be on God's timetable. We also have to be ready, anticipating that God is at work in unexpected ways through unexpected people, even through the distractions of our day. I wonder if Abraham was waiting for God to show up – or if he simply responded with hospitality and then understood that it was God – present and repeating the promise again.

Next time we struggle to believe that God would actually care enough to be present with us and walk with us, we need to ask that great question: “is there anything too hard for God?” **(SHOW SLIDE with question)**

God isn't ridiculing Sarah for laughing, but inviting her to share her heart. Asking that question can put us in closer conversation with God. It will spur us to share the wonderful things that God is doing in our lives and in others' lives, too.

Think about the last time you saw a miracle. It doesn't have to be a grand cosmic event. Maybe just a moment when you noticed the beauty of God's creation. Perhaps a moment of reconciliation with a loved one. God will always find a way into the future. God will not fail. And God is patient with us as we seek to follow God into that future – even with doubts and questions.

That's another powerful part of this encounter. God accepts us – doubts and all. Faith isn't without doubt. And yet, too many of us feel like our faith is weak if we

question God's plan. Abraham and Sarah wondered what in the world God was doing! But at the end of the day, they relied on the promise. And we can, too.

God will follow through on the promise. God isn't limited by our poor timing or late response, but what if we were actually anticipating that God was at work in us? God can do anything – nothing is too hard for God. I had an experience this week where I had to remember that God is at work even when it's difficult to see.

But God can even come straight into our lives. It was in the early 1400's when Andrei Rublev created this famous icon of the three visitors, and we've come to see them as a representation of the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - ever since.

But look closely and notice: it's as if Rublev leaves a place at the table for the person who is looking at the icon - inviting us to the table to be with God. **SHOW RUBLEV icon**

And that's where we come today. We're invited to come to the table of the Lord to experience God's presence in a powerful way - even through this simple meal. We experience God's hospitality, and we experience hope here. May we take heart and believe in the promises of God.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.