

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Genesis 18:1-15
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Wrestling with Age

This week, we are continuing our Series on Wrestling with God as we see how age often plays into that wrestling. This is particularly true when God asks us to do something that we might think is before our age or after our time.

Our scripture story takes us back to Genesis with Abraham and Sarah who were both, let us say, well along in years. If we recall, before Abram was Abraham and Sarai was Sarah, they had been called to leave their home and resettle in a foreign place. When they got there, God told Abram that he would be a father of many nations though at this point they still had no children. Then God told Abram to circumcise every male among them who was eight days old or older. Pretty crazy and demanding thing to ask this elderly patriarch.

Abram did leave his home. He did circumcise every male members of his household including himself. But when it came to believing the promise of having his own offspring, well it just seemed a little out of reach. This is where we find, now, Abraham. Perhaps resting from the heat or better yet healing from the very recent circumcision.

Please join me as we read from Genesis 18:1-15 as we see how this promise of offspring is brought before him and Sarah once again.

“The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. **2** Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3 He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. **4** Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. **5** Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.”

“Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.”

6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”

7 Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. **8** He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

9 “Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him.

“There, in the tent,” he said.

10 Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

11 Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. **12** So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

13 Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ **14** Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

So what is this story all about? Is it really about having children in our older ages? Or is it about the importance of remaining open to God throughout life should God call us to something that seems incongruent with our rational human understanding?

I think this story shows us three ways that Abraham exhibited openness to God through out his life and most particularly during his golden years. First, we see how Abraham was called to show radical hospitality to strangers. Second, we see how he was called to take great risks and invite others into his calling. And third, we see how he was called to believe that what God had promised would come true though he couldn’t see it at present.

First, we see how he was called to radical hospitality.

I appreciated Michael Brown’s sermon last week about hospitality and the importance of eating what was set before him when he visited his daughter serving the PeaceCorps in Ghana, Africa. He had to risk getting sick from the food he was about to eat. His hostess also had to risk that she could afford the expensive food that she had set before her guests.

There is something very leveling about sharing a meal with others. We all need to eat. As we sit at table together, we acknowledge our common humanity. Suddenly differences and prejudices melt away and we can see other as equals.

Hospitality in biblical days was very important. There weren’t any hotels as we know today. Strangers would literally arrive into the center square of the town, meet locals who would then invite them to stay in their homes. As we see in Abraham’s case, these three strangers walked right into the middle of his nomadic camp far out in the desert. Perhaps they were hungry, tired, and weary. Very vulnerable. They would need a place to escape the desert heat and rest from their journey.

So who are these three? The author of Genesis states clearly, “The LORD... Capital L..O..R..D which was the unspoken name of YWH in the Old Testament... appeared to Abraham.” In other words, these three strangers, represented one LORD, one God, a theophany, representing our triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Notice how quickly Abraham catered to their needs. If he found favor with them, perhaps they would soon be on their way and leave Abraham and his family alone. If he did not find favor with them, they might attack him and his family.

But as it was, these three men carry a very important message on behalf of the LORD.

“This time next year, your wife Sarah will have a son.”

Now lets skip forward to the New Testament Book of Acts. Three strangers who also arrived on the Apostle Peter’s doorstep after he had just received a vision from the Lord that told him break with kosher dietary regulations that differentiated Jew from Gentiles.

Peter had a vision of eating all sorts of unkosher foods and was told by the LORD, “Get up, kill, and eat.”

When Peter protested, “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The Lord told him, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

At that very moment, the three Gentile servants from Cornelius a Roman centurion, who Jews would have considered impure, showed up by the Spirit’s prompting to invite Peter to Cornelius’ house and share the Gospel with them.

In both circumstances, Abraham and Peter had to wrestle with whether what they were being called to do was worth the risks that were entailed. Both answered yes. And both were blessed to be part of what God was doing among them.

The author of Hebrews writes, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”¹

The Greek word for entertain strangers is “Philoxenous.” Philo means love. Like in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. Xenias means strangers. Love of strangers. It means showing love and hospitality particularly to people we do not know.

We are also reminded of Jesus’ words that whenever we do something for the least of these, which were strangers, it’s as if we are doing it for the Lord.²

So apparently even in our old age, we are called to practice radical hospitality and do so as if we are entertaining Christ himself.

¹ Hebrews 13:2

² Matthew 25:40

Some of us might think that we are beyond the years of doing great things for the Lord. Can we invite our neighbor over for tea or coffee? Can we show love and kindness to those we don't know? Those just might be some of the greatest missional acts we can do.

Next we see how in Abraham's mature age, he was called to take great risks and invite others into his calling. As mentioned earlier, the LORD called Abram to circumcise every male among him eight days old and older as a sign of the covenant they received from God. That covenant was that God would be their God, and they would be God's people. Could you imagine the push back we'd receive if we started saying things like that? Oh boy! It would be anarchy around here.

But sometimes there are sacrifices that need to be made in order to be part of what God invites us into.

I've mentioned before that God often gives me opportunity to practice what I preach the week of or before the sermon. Just this past Monday, we arrived to find a tent pitched boldly in the front bed between the narthex main doors and the picnic tables outside the fellowship hall. Clearly someone was making a home uninvitedly. A stranger.

We contacted the Clark County Sheriff who came out to investigate. Everything inside was neat and tidy and being right front and center they were clearly reaching out for help.

As it turned out, we were able to contact this person and invited them to talk after work.

Elder Bill Honey and I gave him something to eat and listened to his story. Apparently he had to abruptly leave where he was staying and was starting a new job nearby very early on Monday morning. In desperation he pitched his tent here. We mentioned that we were not equipped to accommodate him long term and talked about what his housing options might be. What we ended up doing was getting him set up in a hotel for a few days until he could get his first paycheck and hopefully begin looking at more long term housing.

This person was articulate, clear thinking, and very appreciative. Not at all the stereotype that one might have toward people camped along the side the road. Again we were called to treat this homeless man as if we were treating Jesus himself. All it took was a risk of time, a little money, and compassion. Who knows what long term impact that might have made on his life.

Now, getting back on topic with wrestling with age, Abraham was called to believe that what God had promised would come true even though he couldn't see it at present.

Several times in Genesis, God had told Abram that he and his wife would be the founders of many nations. It began with God's call to Abram in Genesis 12,

continued when God promised Abram that his servant wouldn't have to serve as an heir in Genesis 15, reiterated it again when God gave Abram the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17 when Abram was ninety-nine years old, and then again in today's visit by the three strangers in Genesis 18. It was something that was promised but clearly had been unfulfilled at this point in their lives.

We can tell by Sarah's response to overhearing this promise by the three strangers that she had wrestled with a good deal of pain, sorrow, and shame over not having had children. She sarcastically laughed to her self, "After I am worn out and my master - is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Plueezze!!!

I found it interesting that the Hebrew wording that Sarah used to describe herself as worn out is *Balah*. It means worn out, spent, decaying. What she is literally describing is how she perceived her womb after menopause. It's a pretty harsh indicator of how society wrongly attached a woman's value to the children she had or didn't have.

The Hebrew wording that Sarah used describe Abraham, however, is "*Zaqen*." It simply means to be an old man. Do we hear the difference between these two?

Clearly Sarah was wrestling with God and her age in being able to believe that she could actually do what God had promised. "They would be bear a son and become parents to a great nation."

The author of Hebrews described this process of wrestling and obeying God as faith.

"By faith Abraham, when called to go a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age - and Sarah her self was barren (hear those value labels?) - was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore."³

It seems from these stories with Abraham and Sarah that wrestling with age and faith go hand in hand. What we are really wrestling with us are the limitations of our humanity and the limitless of God.

Ronald Rolheiser in *Wrestling with God* writes, "Early in life it is often possible to shut out these momentary dissatisfactions as soon as they appear. We can blame them on a bad mood, tough circumstances, or a lousy day. We can

³ Hebrews 11:8-12

assume things will be better tomorrow. With more maturity, however, we may begin to admit that we've been off target in our strivings and have missed the satisfaction we'd expected. Even then, we often think we can adjust our course, renew our efforts, and eventually win our goal. In the middle of life, we begin to sense our time is limited; changes need to be more radical if we're going to find what we want before we're too old to enjoy it."⁴

What we are called to set our sights upon is the faithfulness of the one who makes the promises. God. Whether or not what we receive what was promised. Because God might have something else in mind for us.

Before Abraham and Sarah could embrace what lied ahead, they had to let go of what they had hoped and dreamed of. Only then could they truly be set free to go where God might lead them next.⁵

How are we wrestling with God in our current season of life?

Do we feel too young or unqualified to go where God is calling us?

Are we midlife and needing to readjust what's important?

Are we at a place where we need to let go of certain dreams and embrace what is right before us instead?

Or is God calling us to new and uncertain places that will be outside of our comfort zones?

Today's story with Abraham and Sarah teaches us, that regardless what season of life we are in, that we can we trust that God is a god who is good and faithful to complete whatever he starts in us.

So may we see that wrestling with age and wrestling with God go hand in hand. May we let go of past disappointments in life that may hinder us from embracing where God is leading us next. And may we trust that Jesus will be with us as we go.

Let us pray.

⁴Ronald Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God, Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggles to be Human* (New York: Image Publishers, 2018), 65.

⁵ Ibid, 70. "Liberation, whether experienced pleasurably or painfully, always involves relinquishment, some kind of loss."