

Last week in Pastor’s Mike’s sermon God made a promise to Abraham; a covenant. Remember what a beautiful passage that was? Promising to bless all nations on earth through Abraham? Now when God makes a promise, God keeps a promise. However, we are not always so faithful. God’s timing does not always suit us. And this is what happens to Abraham and Sarah when tasked with waiting for God’s promise. Although Abraham is known as the father of faith, as Pastor Mike told you, that is where Abraham lands in his faith journey, but not where he begins. God promises, as we saw last week, to bless Abraham with more descendants that he can count. More than the stars in the sky. However, there is just one problem. After ten years of living in Canaan, they have not one child.

And so begins chapter after chapter after chapter of Genesis where human beings do things “their way” rather than trust God’s promises. I am going to cover a lot of ground in scripture this morning, but I really encourage you to read all of Genesis as we go through it over these weeks. Read the passages that are in between the ones on Sundays. I bet you might read parts of the Bible you have never read before. I will even dare to say that some of the passages will be shocking to you. There is rape and murder... it is all in there. Why are these terrible stories in the Bible? Because this is what real human sin looks like, and it is the story of God’s continued promise despite the mess we make.

So we begin in Genesis 16. Last week God made his promise to Abraham, the covenant through which God will bless the whole earth. And now we start in chapter 16:

Genesis 16:1-6 “1 Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, “The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.” Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.” 6 “Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.”

I am going to stop there before we go to the next chapter. So how did that go for Abram and Sarai??? Not so well right? She does not believe the promise and so she takes matters into her own hands. She tells Abram to sleep with her slave and make her a wife as well. And he does it without argument. The desired result, a pregnancy, happens, and then Sarai is mad about it and sends Hagar away, pregnant with the child they want for Abram. Do you know anyone this fickle in your life? Or, better yet, and you ever taken matters into your own hands then not been happy with the outcome? Sarai does not think this through. Because she is not willing to wait and see God fulfill God’s promise she gets anxious and tries to have children another way, not thinking through what it will be like for her relationship with this slave, her relationship with Abram, and the child to be born. And we actually see Sarai behave in a way that is cruel. This is what we do when we distrust God’s will and try to do things our own way. We get fearful, we hurt others and rationalize it. And we complicate things. Imagine how different this story would be if Sarai and Abram had just waited for her to get pregnant with Isaac. There would have been no complications in the relationships, the resulting conflict

between Hagar's children and Isaac would never have happened. It could have been so different if they waited for God's plan, but they didn't. And this is something we human beings play out over and over again. Genesis, this very old book of the Bible, as it is turning out is a very contemporary book of the Bible.

So let's continue. We know about Sarai's mistake and Hagar has Ishmael. But Sarai still has no children. And this is where we pick it up in Genesis 18:

Genesis 18:1-5 and 9-15 and 22-26 "1 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." 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."

We will stop here again. Notice their names have changed. Abram is now Abraham and Sarai now Sarah. That is because in Genesis 17 God has re-stated his covenant with Abraham and changed their names. God has clearly stated his promise to them both. The problem is, they don't trust God. Now God comes to Abraham again, and reminds him of the promise in this passage. This passage says that the Lord comes to Abraham and that there are three visitors. Abraham is properly hospitable. But when they tell him that a year from now he will have a son, Sarah who is listening from behind them laughs. She doesn't just doubt now. She laughs. Her disobedience is actually more intense now than it was before. And when they question her one of the greatest questions in the Bible "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" she lies and says she didn't laugh. She lies. She lies to God, and she gets caught.

Now to be fair, Sarah has been barren her whole life and now she is old, past child-bearing age. She has reason to be skeptical on the level of human expectations. But the point is that God fulfills the promise not when it is easy, but when it is hard. If Sarah easily had six children they may have thought that this is was not necessarily a blessing from God but rather just an everyday family. It is because she is barren and now old that there will be no question in anyone's mind that this child is an act of God. God is being very deliberate. God is also teaching Abraham and Sarah. They need to be able to trust and obey. And they are not there yet. So before we get to Abrahams great time of obedience, there is one more quirky passage I want to look at. It is the end of Genesis 18 and beginning of Genesis 19. It is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This might be familiar territory. Most people know about Sodom and Gomorrah, the fact that it was evil and destroyed, and the fact that Lot's wife looks back and turns into a pillar of salt. Those are pretty well-known Old Testament stories. What is often overlooked is the fact that both Abraham and Lot argue and bargain with God in the

process. Neither one is content with how God is handling the situation. So they try to negotiate. First Abraham from Genesis 18:

20 Then the Lord said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” 22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. 23 Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” 26 The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

Pretty bold huh? This negotiation continues until Abraham gets God to promise if there are ten righteous are found in all of Sodom and Gomorrah, it will be spared for their sake. And we all know how this ends, the city is destroyed. So what is Abraham’s problem here? He does not trust God. He does not trust God not only in the area of promise and doing good, but he is afraid God will be harsh on an evil city. He really does not know God yet and he does not trust God. This is the stumbling block to his relationship. It is the same issue for Lot. God sends angels to rescue Lot from the city before it is destroyed. And listen to how Lot responds in Genesis 19, starting at verse 15:

15 With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.” 16 When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. 17 As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” 18 But Lot said to them, “No, my lords, please! 19 Your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have shown great kindness to me in sparing my life. But I can’t flee to the mountains; this disaster will overtake me, and I’ll die. 20 Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it—it is very small, isn’t it? Then my life will be spared.”

Wow, you have to love this passage. God sends angels to save Lot and his family and how does Lot respond? First he doesn’t want to go. Then once convinced he has to go he doesn’t want to flee to where God sends him. He wants to go someplace else. Have you ever tried to negotiate with God? Have you ever said “now God, if you do this one thing, I will be sure to do this in response.” Or you get a very clear direction from God and you respond with “mmmmm...I don’t love that idea. I’ll just pretend I didn’t get that message from God. No one will know and I will just keep living my life.” These are very real games that we can and do play with God. And it is taught all the way back in Genesis that these games don’t work. This is not what is best for you. God knows what is best for you. Do you see how important the book Genesis is? You can save yourself a lot of disappointment and grief if you take these lessons, very old ones to heart.

So despite Abraham and Sarah’s disbelief, decisions to try to accomplish things their way, and complete distrust of the God who made them and knows what is best for them, God fulfills the promise anyway.

Genesis 21:1-3 “1 Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.”

These verses are so simple and yet they say so much. The Lord was gracious. God put up with a lot from Sarah at this point. And God did what he promised when he promised it. How many times does God do this for us? Look back on your life. How many times has God blessed you and sustained you even though every one of us has been sinful and failed him? So they have their son Isaac. Life is good. God has shown that God can do anything, as well as God always does what God promises. It would be nice if the story ended here. But even though God has come through with his end of the covenant so far, Abraham has not. Abraham has been selfish, disobedient, and been willing to argue and bargain with God because he does not trust God. What God needs is an obedient man to establish his people. Now we get to Genesis 22: now we come to the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. I have spent a significant amount of time this morning leading up to this passage. And the reason I have done this is that I don't think the story of the sacrifice of Isaac makes sense if you do not know what Abraham and Sarah's relationship with God has been up to this point. After disobedience, defiance, mistrust, and arguing, now that God has still promised to be faithful, can Abraham do the same? Let's see in Genesis 22:

Genesis 22:1-12 “1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. 2 Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” 6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” 8 Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. 9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. 12 “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

There are many people think this is a terrible story. How could God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Furthermore, why would I preach on this on Father's Day??? I have heard people read into this story a lot. I have heard the argument that Abraham knows God won't go through with it, that it is just a test. These rationalizations make people feel better. But we do not know any such thing about what Abraham knows. What we DO know is that finally, Abraham trusts God enough to be obedient. It is this kind of obedience that is needed for the covenant to work and for ultimately, the line of Abraham lead to the coming of Jesus Christ.

Now we should remember that a sacrifice to God was how human beings showed honor and respect to God. A sacrifice was the act of simply giving to God what already belonged to God. Isaac is a gift from God to Abraham and Sarah. A long awaited one. And as we have seen this morning, Abraham and Sarah have a long history of taking matters into their own hands and being unwilling to trust what God is doing. So when we see Abraham in Genesis 22, when God asks the most difficult thing he has asked of Abraham so far, Abraham is changed. He does not look for a go-around. He does not argue. He does not bargain. He has already done all those things and yet God has persevered with him. So this time, Abraham shows he can obey God, he can trust God, and he is willing to live within the parameters that God has given him.

This faith journey can tell us a lot. It speaks a lot to me. All of us are on this journey of learning to trust God. Sometimes we fail and we try to bargain with God, or we flat out disobey God. But God's pursuit of Abraham and Sarah, despite their failings, is indicative of how much God wants that relationship with us and that God continues to work with us where we are. And when God's request of Abraham seems unfair to you, remember that God is not asking of Abraham anything that God will not be willing to suffer in the sacrifice of God's own son. Did you notice that the language God uses to speak to Abraham about Isaac? It is the same language God uses to refer to Jesus. In verse 1 of Genesis 22 God says "Take your son, your only son, whom you love." And in the New Testament at both the baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration, God says "this is my beloved son...the son whom I love." The passage about the sacrifice of Isaac is a purposeful prophecy of the sacrifice of the Son of God. And if you are bothered by the fact that God asks Abraham to consider sacrificing his own son, you should be way more bothered by the fact that God DID sacrifice his son. Isaac was spared, Jesus was not. The fact that God would make that large a sacrifice for you and for me should bother us. We should be blown away by it. It should stir us, it should convict us, and hopefully move all of us to turn and trust God. God does not just ask you for your trust. God keeps up his end of the covenant, from Genesis to today. God has made a way. The question is, will we be faithful in return? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.