

Abraham and Sarah



Genesis 18:9 "(Then the three strangers) said to (Abraham), 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself."

You do not want to miss Church this summer, for the theme threaded throughout the Old Testament readings from today until the middle of November, are lives of the Patriarchs; the great stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then the story of Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, and then the story of Moses. Those

marvelous tales will carry us right through until the First Sunday of Advent, so that if you listen to the sermons each week this summer you will hear the greater part of each of the Patriarch's stories. Oh, I am aware that you think you know those stories from Sunday School. But I am here to tell you that you don't, that what you learned in Sunday School was only the sanitized short version of their lives. So you need to listen to the sermons each Sunday this summer to catch up, to move from a childish understanding of the lives of the Patriarchs to a mature and informed faith. Even then, you will sometimes have to listen closely to catch important details, and even after that, parts of the story are still being left out to make them more acceptable to modern ears.

So we begin today with the familiar story of Abraham, the first Patriarch, the heralded father of three of the world's great religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Abraham, you may remember from Sunday School, left his home in the Ur of the Chaldees (which is in present day Iraq) and journeyed to land of Canaan, to an unknown land which God promised would be Abraham's and his descendants forever. Only Abraham and his wife Sarah didn't have any descendants, and they were already old, having left their home in the Ur of the Chaldees when Abraham was already 75 years old, and when Sarah 'had ceased to be after the manner of women,' as the Bible says, meaning that she was post-menopausal. Nonetheless Abraham's and Sarah's willingness to

believe this promise of God, that God would give them a new promised land for them and their descendants forever, and to act upon that promise, is a shining example of great faith and trust in God.

But there is much more to the story than that, more than you learned in Sunday School. First, it was Abraham's father, Terah, who first lead this group from Ur of the Chaldees towards Canaan, not Abraham. And the group included not only Abraham and Sarah, but one of Abraham's brothers and his wives, and the son of another of Abraham's brothers, named Lot. The family settled for a time at Haran, a city in present day Turkey. We are not sure how long they lived there, but Terah died and was buried there. And Abraham's brother and wives stayed behind, when Abraham, Sarah and Lot moved on. This is important, because later Abraham and Isaac will send their sons to go find wives among the family back home in Haran, and not among the Canaanites.

In today's story, we have three mysterious visitors who came to Abraham and Sarah announcing the birth of a son, in due season, at which Sarah laughed. You probably remember that one from the Sunday School. However, a whole lot has already happened in this story already besides just leaving the Ur of the Chaldees, and some parts of the stories reveal that Abraham and Sarah were very real and fallible human beings, like us. They also had their moments of doubt and despair, like us. This

is not the Abraham from your Sunday School. For example, when they finally arrived in Canaan, there was a severe famine in the land, so the group headed on to Egypt to seek relief (Joseph and his family will also journey to Egypt during another famine in another couple of generations). On the way to Egypt, Abraham told his wife Sarah to lie, and to say that she was not his wife, but was his 'sister', so that the Egyptians would not kill him and take her away from him, because she was such a beauty, even at that advanced age. And so Sarah lied, but even so she ended up in the Pharaoh's harem, for which Abraham was rewarded with great flocks of sheep and donkeys and oxen and camel and male & female servants. When the Pharaoh discovered the lie, he sent Abraham and Sarah packing, but they got to keep the flocks and servants that they had received. Indeed Lot and Abraham had so many flocks that the land upon their return could not sustain the numbers, we are told. So Abraham and Lot separated, with Lot moving into the plain of the Jordan, while Abraham stayed by the oaks of Mamre in Canaan. Interestingly Abraham and Sarah will tell the same lie again later in their dealings with King Abimelech. Abraham and Sarah were not saints. Nor was Lot as will be remembered from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where he settled.

After a while Abraham and Sarah also began to doubt God's promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. So much so that Sarah gave to Abraham her husband, her servant,

Hagar, so that he might conceive a son through her, in order to fulfill God's promise (Later Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel will do the same thing when they think they are infertile). The doubts of Abraham and Sarah about God being able to keep his promise of children to this very old couple seem perfectly reasonable at their age, like something we might do. Hagar, we will see in next week's story, did indeed give Abraham a son, named Ishmael, and Abraham, we are told, loved Ishmael very much.

Then we come to today's famous story of those three stranger visitors who passed through the region on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah, and who prophesized that Sarah at 85, would be pregnant by the time they returned again that way in a year, and Sarah upon hearing this laughed, a very human response. But Sarah did become pregnant and gave birth to her only child, Isaac, the next year as promised. Isaac and Ishmael played together as children, but you will see in next week's reading that Sarah became jealous for her child, and for his inheritance, for his claim to the land God promised them. She didn't need Hagar's child anymore now that she had a son of her own. And Abraham gave in and allowed Sarah to banish Hagar, her servant, and her son, Ishmael, whom he loved, to cast them out into the desert with few provisions to sustain them. The two of them would have died there had God not interceded to save them

both. And Ishmael did indeed grow up and became the father of a great nation, the desert people, whom we call Arabs today.

But then strangely, as we hear in two weeks' time, Abraham will feel called by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. You will surely remember this odd story from Sunday School. Abraham, we are told, got up very early in the morning and left camp, apparently without talking to Sarah first. Abraham took Isaac and some servants and went to the mountain to which God directed him. Then Abraham left the servants at the bottom of the mountain, so they could not interfere, and he and Isaac climbed to mountain to make sacrifice. On the way up, Isaac, carrying the wood, asked his father again and again where the animal was for the sacrifice, and Abraham answered his son again and again that God would provide the lamb for himself. And God, as we all remember from Sunday School, intervened at the last moment and spared Isaac and rewarded Abraham once again for his great faith and trust in God, for his willingness to sacrifice is only son Isaac, whom he loved. This too is often viewed a sign of Abraham's great faith and trust in God, but the consequences of that event lingered for the remainder of Abraham's life.

For if you read the Scriptures carefully, Abraham never went home again after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham did not return to Hebron, where Sarah was, where they lived, where they settled when they first arrived in Canaan. We are told instead that Abraham settled in Beersheba. In fact, Abraham

is never recorded as returning to Hebron ever again, except for one time, to mourn and weep at Sarah's death and to bury her in cave he had purchased by the oaks of Mamre. There is a ring of authenticity in lots of the details of this story. The story of the Patriarch Abraham is not some stylized fable of a man, but the struggle of an ordinary person to be faithful to God.

Later, Abraham will send his chief servant to go and find a suitable wife for Isaac back in the old country, back in Haran, and the servant takes lots of gold and silver and camels and ornate garments to present to Rebekah's father Laban. Then the servant brings Rebekah home to Isaac, but notice that Isaac is not in Beersheba with his father Abraham. He is in the Negev with his mother Sarah. It would appear that Abraham's and Sarah's relation was strained after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac, and I am not surprised we never see Abraham and Sarah together again, but I also suspect that the relation between Abraham and his son Isaac was also strained, although we are told again and again Abraham loved Isaac. So I am not at all surprised that Isaac and his new bride are found at his mother Sarah's, not with Abraham back in Beersheba. Indeed in Genesis we are told that Abraham then took a new wife, Keturah, in his old age, living alone, without his wife Sarah and his son Isaac, and that Abraham had six more sons with his new wife Keturah (There goes any idea that the Biblical norm for marriage was one

man and one wife, for Abraham, the Great Patriarch, had two wives, plus Sarah's handmaid).

So at the end of his life, Abraham is living without his son Ishmael whom we were told again and again that he loved, a child he cast out into his desert to please his wife Sarah, and Abraham is without his beloved Sarah, his wife for so many, many years, for whom he wept and mourned at her death, and he is now also without his son, Isaac, whom he loved. The end of Abraham's life must have been very hard indeed, and though Abraham had six more sons with Keturah, he left everything, we are told, to Isaac, whom he loved.

So Isaac took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death, but alas, was there any comfort for poor Abraham. When Abraham died, his sons Isaac and Ishmael, we are told, came to bury him, in the cave by the oaks of Mamre, buried next to his beloved wife Sarah, from whom he had been estranged for so many years. God's promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation was indeed fulfilled, but that promise cost Abraham greatly. Amen.