

October 18, 2009

“Take My Wife ... Please”

a sermon on Genesis 12.10 – 13.1

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Do you ever despair when you consider the state of the church today? In the past couple of generations, our culture has abandoned its Christian roots. Actually the process took much longer, but changes sped up and decisive milestones were reached in the past couple of generations. A hundred years ago, the church was the home team, so to speak. Now we are on the road facing a hostile crowd. On the plus side, we now have unprecedented opportunity. A vast mission field sits right on our doorstep. But we hardly seem ready to enter it. Most Christians feel the changes in our culture as a great loss, and they mourn what was. It is not easy to get over what was so that we can face what is and play our part in what will be.

If external pressures were the only challenge facing the church, we could still be optimistic, but of course bigger problems lurk within. All denominations have compromised with the larger secular culture somewhat – some more than others. Ours certainly has. The result is, the church itself hardly knows what it believes anymore. We live in a time when many people have no idea what the Bible teaches or what Christianity really is. Little wonder they don't ask us, because we squabble among ourselves over basic teachings and morals. I am speaking of course of the denomination, not Westminster, where we hold to sound Christian teaching that would have been recognizable to previous generations of faithful believers.

Even here, though, we face limited resources. You know the budget situation. You can see the people situation and the constant limitation of not enough volunteers. Yes, we have wonderful people who give generously of their time and money. We just don't have enough of them. And we are typical, not only of mainline churches but of all churches.

I get discouraged by the state of the clergy. I don't have a lot of answers for our situation. I'd like to think that's because I'm just slow and other ministers have all the answers, but it's obvious they don't or things would be different. The truth is, there are no easy answers – only God's call to faithfulness and his promise that his purposes will not fail.

If you ever despair that the church of today is not up to the task God has given us, this morning's scripture reading is for you. What does this crazy story about Abraham

pawning his wife off have to do with the church? More than you might think. It reminds us that God keeps his promises and advances his purposes, in spite of the bungling of his servants. God can work through us for his purposes. He can also work in spite of us. That is no excuse to be unfaithful – not at all. God’s purposes do not fail when we are unfaithful, but we do bring unnecessary suffering on ourselves. The encouraging message, though, is that God’s purposes never fail. That assurance ought to give us courage to do the work God has given us, whether success appears probable or not. In fact, whether we succeed or not, in the way that we would want to. Many of the Old Testament prophets, for example, were not successful in the usual sense of that word, although they were faithful. Again, this is not an excuse for mediocrity, rather it is an encouragement to give our best over and over whether we succeed or fail.

This story about Abraham is a crazy one. The text uses the names Abram and Sarai. God later changed their names to Abraham and Sarah. I’m going to use Abraham and Sarah because I’m used to those and will probably slip into them anyway. Two other accounts in the book of Genesis are like this story. In one Abraham pulls this stunt again. In the other, Isaac does. Scholars think this is the oldest and original version of the story because it shows signs of oral transmission. It has the classic form of oral folklore. That’s not to say it didn’t happen, just that it was passed on by storytellers for a long time before it was ever written down.

If all you read was this story, you might think the moral is something like: Don’t ever lie about who your wife is and let another man marry her, or if your husband hatches a nutty scheme like this one, don’t go along with it. But this kind of interpretation is too simplistic. Besides, do we really need a special story in the Bible to tell us something so obvious? I mean, what was Abraham thinking? No, to understand this passage, you have to read it in context. And this is a principle one should always use to interpret the Bible. Where does the passage you are reading fit into its book? Where does it fit into the one great story of the Bible?

In this case, the answer to those questions means everything. Chapter 12 of Genesis opens with God’s call to Abraham. It is the beginning of God’s great plan of salvation. Hints had been dropped prior to this, but here for the first time God’s plan gets traction. God calls Abraham; and God promises to make him a great nation, to give him the Promised Land, and to bless him. God concludes by telling Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Paul and the early Christians saw in this promise a specific reference to Jesus Christ. And they were right. God had a plan to reconcile the whole world to himself, through his Son Jesus, and that plan started with Abraham.

So that’s the situation. God has just made his covenant with Abraham. And Abraham, for his part, answered God’s call with faith and obedience. God said, “Go!” And Abraham and Sarah packed up and went. They didn’t know where they were going.

God said, "to the land that I will show you." They stepped out on faith. They went. They were faithful. All is well.

Or at least it was ... as our passage opens a famine in Canaan forces Abraham and Company to travel down to Egypt in search of food. It was a road his descendants would take again in the time of Joseph. Abraham is fearful. His trust in God wavers a bit. Perhaps he figured God could use a helping hand, so he comes up with this scheme. ... It would be easy to criticize, but let me say two things in his defense. First of all, he didn't tell a complete lie. Sarah was his half sister [Genesis 20.12]. Not that that helps any. Second, he never intended to give Sarah to another man. His plan was madness, yet there was a method to it. If he went to Egypt as Sarah's husband, another man might get ideas and see him as an obstacle that could be removed. Why he would worry about that, I am not sure, but he did. If, however, he appeared as her brother, then any man who got ideas would try to butter him up. Abraham figured he could politely refuse any potential suitors. If some man made overtures, Abraham could put him off, no harm done. Sarah never says a word in the passage, but we might assume this was why she went along with the scheme. Neither she nor Abraham ever dreamed circumstances would reach a point where they would be separated.

At this point, allow me to digress into one of the great mysteries of the Bible. According to Genesis, when this story takes place, Sarah is about 65 years old. I mean no disrespect to any woman 65 or older. Many women remain quite striking at that age. Still, one does wonder why Abraham was so concerned. He thought she was so beautiful that another man might kill him to get her. How many women in their 20s or 30s merit that level of concern? According to the text, these were not the delusions of a neurotic husband. The Egyptians did find Sarah remarkably beautiful. She was so lovely, in fact, that word of her reached Pharaoh himself, and he desired her. Is this plausible? Different explanations have been put forward through the ages. The best one I have found is from Gordon J. Wenham. In his commentary on Genesis, he writes: "Ideas of feminine beauty in traditional societies differ from ours: well-endowed, matronly figures, not slim youthful ones, tend to represent their ideal of womanhood" [Word Biblical Commentary, p. 288]. He is correct that ideals of beauty vary across cultures, but I remain puzzled. ...

Unforeseen circumstances have a way of unraveling even brilliant plans. Half-baked schemes blow up when the unexpected occurs. Abraham was sure he could fend off any potential suitor, but he never reckoned on Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the most powerful man in Egypt. His subjects worshipped him as a god. What Pharaoh wants, Pharaoh gets. Abraham found himself trapped in a situation he had created, and he could not get out. The result: Sarah goes to live with Pharaoh, who heaps gifts on Abraham. It was customary in those days for presents to be given to the bride's family, and the richer the husband the better the presents.

I believe the technical term for a man in Abraham's position is *pimp*. Abraham, the great blessing to all the earth, begins his career as God's chosen servant miserably. I'm not sure how all the rest of the earth felt about it, but Sarah and Pharaoh were anything but blessed. And you perceive the bigger problem? God has promised to make Abraham a great nation. God's plan is to give Abraham an heir through Sarah. From their line would come Israel and the Messiah. Abraham, through his bungling, has put the whole plan in jeopardy. God's promises were in danger of dying as soon as they were born. Without Sarah, there would be no Isaac; without Isaac, there would be no Jacob, also known as Israel, and the twelve tribes of Israel descended from him. Without Israel, there would be no Jesus. Without Jesus ... the world would have no Savior. Without a Savior, the purposes for which God created the world would fail. God staked everything on Abraham and Sarah, and at least initially, that looked like a disastrous mistake.

Fortunately, thwarting God's plan is more than any man can do, whether through evil intent or simple incompetence. God steps into the situation to set things right. The Lord afflicted Pharaoh with great plagues – not the last time that's going to happen in the Bible – but unlike the Pharaoh who dealt with Moses (and that Pharaoh lived hundreds of years after Abraham's time), this Pharaoh respects God. Abraham had wronged him terribly by more or less tricking him into adultery, which in the ancient world was considered a particularly grievous sin. When he accuses Abraham, Abraham says nothing in his own defense – a device through which the narrator of the story shows Abraham to be in the wrong. The penalty imposed on Abraham is light, given the offense. Perhaps Pharaoh recognized God's hand protected Abraham. So, Abraham and Sarah get kicked out of Egypt, but they do get to take their new wealth with them. That foreshadows the Exodus as well.

What are we to make of this interesting story? It is important in the overall saga of the Bible because it represents the very first threat to God's promises. Over and over again, God's promises will hang by nothing more than a hair. They will be one inch away from failing, but God does not let them fail. He always makes a way, even when there is no way. From the perspective of the whole Bible, the greatest threat to God's promises came when Jesus died on the cross. His disciples took it that way. They thought he had failed. Yet the Father raised him from the dead. The promise had not failed, but rather God had fulfilled it in a surprising way no one could have foreseen.

Our story this morning is about God's faithfulness. He does not let his promises fail. The storyteller has constructed the story to make this point by reminding us of two other stories. Again, this is not to say this did not happen, merely that it is told in a certain way to make a certain point.

One of these stories is the Exodus. I mentioned just a couple of parallels. A famine drives God's people to Egypt where they find food. Abraham fears he will be killed but

Sarah spared, just as the later Pharaoh would order the death of the Hebrew boys but not the girls. There is the obvious presence of Pharaoh and the plagues. There is the order to leave Egypt. And of course both Abraham and the children of Israel under Moses depart loaded with loot. John Sailhammer in the Expositor's Bible Commentary lists twenty parallels between this Abraham story and the story of Joseph and the Exodus [*Genesis*, p. 159]. Some of them are a lot easier to spot if you are reading Genesis in the original Hebrew. It can be as simple as a few key words. Whoever wrote down this story about Abraham wanted us to think of the Exodus when we read it.

The other story is the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2–3. The same Hebrew words for "beautiful" and "pleasant" are used to describe the trees of the Garden of Eden and, in this passage, Sarah's appearance. In both stories, the beautiful fruit or person is desired and taken. Pharaoh's question to Abraham, "What have you done?" is word for word exactly the question God asks Eve when she ate the fruit. And, finally, Pharaoh expels Abraham and Sarah from Egypt just as God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden.

By the way, I am pointing all this out to you not to bore you with literary details, but because whoever wrote Genesis 12 expected readers to pick up on these things. Unless you read the text in Hebrew, you probably missed them. I don't want you to miss them, because they are important. All these things go together. All of them work together to make the same point: God does not let his purposes fail.

I think this is why Genesis has two more stories about Abraham and Isaac losing their wives in exactly the same scheme. Why the repetition? Genesis itself gives us the reason. When Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream, he explains why God sent the same dream two different ways (once with thin cows eating fat cows and once with withered corn displacing healthy corn). He says, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do ... The doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about" [Gen 41.25, 32]. The repetition is there to assure us that God is faithful, and his purposes cannot fail.

I want to conclude with a final thought about Abraham and how we are like him. Scripture holds Abraham up as a model of faith. You no doubt know the story of how God tested Abraham, so that he almost sacrificed his son Isaac. The purpose of that story was to protect Israelite children. The logic is simple: If Abraham, the great friend of God, did not sacrifice his child, then you do not need to sacrifice your child, no matter what your pagan neighbors might do or say. It functions this way because it assumes Abraham is a model others will want to emulate. The New Testament, especially Paul, holds up Abraham as an example of a person who was justified by faith. In other words, he had a good relationship with God because he trusted God. He believed God's promises.

If Abraham is supposed to be a role model, what do we make of this story? It reminds us that all our heroes have feet of clay. This story reminds me of how Peter denied knowing Jesus. God's chosen servants sometimes let God down. We all do. Jesus is the only exception. Like the story about Peter, this story is also a warning to us. We all have the potential to bless others or to bring suffering upon them and us. We are particularly prone to disaster when our faith in God wavers.

Any thoughtful person realizes how our heroes serve us best as models and warnings. We see in them qualities we want for ourselves, like a daring faith. We can also learn from their mistakes.

I like this story about Abraham's crazy scheme. It is delightfully entertaining. Best of all, it sets the tone for the rest of the Bible and the rest of history. God's purposes do not fail. No matter what threats arise, no matter how faithful or unfaithful his people may be at any given time, he is sovereign. He is in control. His plan – to set creation right and to reconcile all things in Jesus Christ – this plan cannot fail.

And this assurance sets us free to be faithful. It is not an excuse to attempt half-hearted things for God. It is license to try great things for God, knowing that he will succeed whether we do or not. If no one listens to us, if the church in America dwindles to a shadow of its former self, as it has in Europe, we will press on. We will be faithful win or lose. Because we know that ultimately we will not lose. For we have put our trust in God, and he cannot fail. He will keep his promises.

So I want you to keep your chin up. And I want you to press on. And I want you to have faith like Abraham's. Paul claimed that even though Abraham lived a long time before Jesus, Abraham had *resurrection* faith. Sarah was barren and well past childbearing. Yet Abraham believed God could create life where there was no life. He believed in God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" [Rom 4.17]. That's our God. SO no matter how discouraging circumstances might become, we never give up. Amen.

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