

ViralStJames Bible Study #19: Advent – Hope

The Background – Hope

Abraham and Sarah Genesis 18 1-15; and 21 1-7

We are now entering the season of Advent – the four Sundays before Christmas, where traditionally we look forward to the coming of Christ – first as a baby, and then to his eventual return. It is a looking back to the birth of our hope in Jesus, and a reminder that part of our hope is deferred and looking forward to his eventual return. If we were in our building at St James we would be lighting a different candle on the Christmas wreath each Sunday – celebrating hope; faith; joy and peace, or in other traditions, the patriarchs; prophets; John the Baptist; and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

This year, we may be looking forward to the hope of a vaccine for the covid virus allowing us to return to normal life next year. But as Christians, our hope has a firmer foundation. In this first study, we look at Abraham, the first of the patriarchs (or fathers) and the hope he had.

The Passage – Genesis 18 1-15; and 21 1-7

Gen. 18:1 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Gen. 18:9 They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

Gen. 21:1 The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” ⁷ And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

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The Questions

- 1) **Abraham is taking a rest at the hottest time of the day when three strangers appear. How does he respond? Why does he respond like this?**
 - *He recognises their needs for refreshment and food;*
 - *The lavishness of his provision suggests generosity;*
 - *It was an Israelite tradition to show hospitality to strangers – he puts his faith into practice, but with generosity (reminiscent of Jesus at the wedding in Cana and the provision of large amounts of the best wine)*

- 2) **It is not clear when he recognises that these men are from God and include in some way the Lord himself, but by verse 10 it is becoming evident. God speaks to Abraham and his wife, promising the fulfilment of their hope – a child born to Sarah. What is Sarah’s reaction? Does it surprise you?**
 - *Sarah laughs*
 - *It is an understandable human response – she was well past normal child bearing age – perhaps it is not surprising that there is an element of disbelief*
 - *The Bible deals with human stories, not superheroes – hers was a very human response that we can identify with*

- 3) **What is God’s reaction to her laughter? When Sarah is called out for laughing, what is her response and what prompts it?**
 - *God’s response is one of Scripture’s great promises – is anything too hard for the Lord?*
 - *Sarah lies, denying that she laughed, because she was afraid – again, an understandable human response*

- 4) **Compare Sarah’s reaction to being told that she will have a baby at an age in life that seems impossible, with that of Mary, when told that she will give birth at the other end of the age range, and as a virgin (Luke 1:29-38)**
 - *Sarah is afraid; Mary too ‘was greatly troubled’ (v29)*
 - *But whilst Sarah denies laughing – Mary seems more obedient and accepting (I am the Lords servant, May it be to me as you have said’ (v37)*
 - *Note the similarity between Genesis 18:14 and Luke 1:37 – God acts consistently in dealing with his people throughout the ages – but do we try to put limits on him? Can we, like Mary, keep ourselves open to what he may wish to accomplish through us?*

- 5) **Sarah denies laughing (18:15) – but how does God treat her (18:15; 21:1-2)**
 - *God doesn’t reprimand her but does correct her. He wants her to be honest in expressing her feelings and speak them out, not keep silent*
 - *He was gracious to her – and delivers on his promise*
 - *God transforms her laughter into joy*

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- 6) Abraham was simply going about his everyday business when God shows up. Do we expect God to show up in the everyday events of our lives? It may be worth reflecting on Hebrews 13:1-2 and Jesus's words in Matthew 25:35.
- 7) Compare Abraham's invitation to and treatment of the three strangers to the invitation and treatment that Jesus received from Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7:36-47. What can we learn from this?
- *Jesus is interested in our actions, as our actions show where our heart is. Abraham put his faith into action and treated strangers with lavish hospitality and care; Simon was interested in hearing what 'the teacher' had to say, but less keen to be generous in seeing to his needs (no washing of feet, no greeting) or recognising the needs of others (the woman).*
 - *Jesus may tell good stories, but they are told to prompt change in our actions towards God and to one another – they are not just to entertain us*
- 8) Abraham and Sarah's hope is realised with the birth to Sarah of Isaac (Isaac means 'he laughs', or 'laughter' which may sum up both her joy and her earlier encounter with God). What can we learn from this story?
- *God may meet us in the everyday activities of life*
 - *Putting our faith into action – we may never know who we help*
 - *God wants us to be honest in our expressions – but perhaps he also wants us to 'wake up and smell the coffee' – to see where he is acting and respond*
 - *Not to put limits on what God may want to do – through us or others*
 - *Hope can sometimes take a long time to be realised*
- 9) After a life that saw many trials and tribulations (including being passed off by her husband as his sister!), Sarah is finally able to celebrate the joy of a new birth. For many of us, this year has also seen its trials and tribulations, but are there things that you too can thank God for this year? Are there things that we can look forward to next year with hope, faith and expectation?

Space for notes:
