

## Scripture Reading: Genesis 18

**“1 Then Jehovah appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. 2 So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, 3 and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. 4 Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant." They said, "Do as you have said." 6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes." 7 And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. 8 So he took butter and milk & the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate. 9 Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" So he said, "Here, in the tent." 10 And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.) 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. 12 Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" 13 And Jehovah said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?' 14 Is anything too hard for Jehovah? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"”**

**Luke 2: “1 And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. 3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. 6 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

# **'Mary as the Greater Sarah'**

**We come this morning to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent in the year of our Lord 2014... Here at Church of the King we follow the major events on the Church calendar which has been practiced for well over a thousand years in Church history as a means of instruction. As with most things in the Christian life it is a good and helpful road to be on but, as usual, has a couple of ditches on either side...**

**In some quarters there has grown up a slavish adherence to calendar events where you can find something “special” for all most every day of the year...**

- However the focus is no longer on Jesus but rather on the events themselves and other Saints from Church history.**

**Of course I would argue that the problem in many of the American Churches today is the ditch on the other side where the church calendar is almost completely ignored!**

**Most still celebrate Christmas and Easter but even those come under regular attacks these days from within Christian circles from those who claim they are just dressed up pagan holidays.**

**On the other hand, when we rightly see the flow of the Church calendar and why certain days or seasons are highlighted, then it is Jesus who remains at the center as He should!**

**This is why the season of Advent is both the beginning and the end of the church year... We begin by remembering the importance of the birth of Jesus as our Savior... C.S. Lewis said it well:**

**"The birth of Christ is the central event in the history of the earth -- the very thing the whole story has been about." As we often say, God is telling His story of salvation and Jesus is the center of that story! [BTW, that means the center is not us!]**

- **I might also point out for those who wonder if calendars are important, that our world still counts the years based on that central event... The year of our Lord 2014!**

**After Christmas we have the season of Epiphany, which is a word we are less familiar with today but simply means manifestation! This is what is given to us in the Gospel accounts, the full revelation of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ who clearly said, IF you have seen me you have seen the Father!**

**Of course all four Gospel accounts culminate in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the focal point of our salvation which bring us to the next major days on the Church calendar:**

**Psalm Sunday when Jesus arrived at Jerusalem at His appointed time... Good Friday when Jesus presented Himself as THE sacrifice for sin... And Easter: Resurrection Sunday when Jesus was raised in power!**

**Jesus continued to instruct His disciples for another 40 days and then Ascended into heaven to reign at the Father's right hand... Then comes the next major day on the Church calendar: Pentecost when the Spirit, the promised Comforter, was poured out on the Church: The Body of Christ which He would use to fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus!**

**Thus the season of Pentecost, or what is also called normal or ordinary time continues for the rest of the year, just as our obedience should follow our realizing the impact of God's gracious salvation in our lives! This of course culminates in the return of Jesus: Whether at death for us as individuals or His Second coming at the end of history for all the world! We anticipate the return of Jesus with great joy and thus our calendar ends as well as begins in the season of Advent looking again for the coming of Jesus.**

**Well that is a quick review of the importance of the Church calendar, but you may all be wondering at this point what any of that has to do with the texts I chose to read this morning [no less my sermon title]!**

**I will not be picking up my formal journey through the Book of Genesis until the New Year...**

- **But, I want to note that in both the story of Abraham with the promise of Isaac, as well as the story of Joseph and the birth of Jesus, we have women playing important roles!**
- **Thus I thought it might be helpful on this Advent Sunday where we traditionally focus on hope to see how Mary in many ways was the greater Sarah.**

**We also see obedience & hospitality in both accounts which I want to also touch on in a moment...**

**We have studied the 17<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis at length and seen how is it the central section or focus of the promise to Abraham that he would have a son of promise, Isaac.**

- **And at the center of that central chapter we saw the promise made that Sarah would bear that son!**

**In our text I read this morning we see God returning the next year as He promised and assuring Abraham and Sarah that His promise would be fulfilled:**

- **A promise that is so unbelievable to Sarah that she laughs to herself [she thought], but in the end she believes God as she should have.**

**Mary was also given an amazing promise: Not a son in her old age when she was past child-bearing years, but bearing a child as a young virgin...**

- **Something completely impossible from a human perspective!**

These promises are fulfilled for both mothers and in Luke we find Elizabeth & Mary reflecting on what this means... Mary visits Elizabeth who was also granted a child in her old age and as Mary approaches, Elizabeth says... [Luke1:43] "But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. 45 Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."

There are some important lessons here as we consider Mary as the greater Sarah...

The first hard one for Protestants is that it is OK to call Mary the mother of God, because that is what the Bible says that she is, as long as you believe that Jesus was fully God!

The second is hard for the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christians to believe and that is the fact that Mary is commended NOT for who she was or is, but for her faith!

God did not require a woman who had an immaculate conception herself, nor a woman who would remain a virgin and not be a normal wife for Joseph or mother to her other children, and not even a woman who would not have lapses in her faith like the time she wanted Jesus to curtail His ministry...

- God simply required a woman who would believe and have faith as the others in the history of God's people had done!

This began with the first woman WAY back in the garden who succumbed to the temptations of Satan but would later be named Eve by Adam...

- The mother of all living!

It continues here with Sarah who despite her human plans with Ismael or even laughing at God's promise, would be the faithful mother of Isaac who is commended in the great hall of faith where we read at Hebrews 11:11 "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised."

As we have seen in our study of the Book of Beginnings where we have 'flawed' righteous men like Noah and Abraham, so it is with the women of the Bible, including Mary. In fact it is quite telling that Mary is the fifth woman mentioned in the Genealogy of Jesus given in Matthew's Gospel account just BEFORE the angel appears to Joseph. Yes, the virgin Joseph wanted to marry was going to be greatly used of God, just as these other women had been...

*[I am going to give a quick review, so if you don't know these Bible accounts well enough to see the full impact here, you will know your homework assignment for this Advent season!]*

First we have Tamar who prevented her father Judah from allowing the line of promise to come to an end with him. Next we have Rahab who left her whoring ways to change sides and serve Jehovah and then to even be included in the line of promise! After this we have Ruth who turned from her family idols to be a faithful daughter to Naomi and wife to Boaz. And the last before Mary is Bathsheba who is simply called the wife of Uriah to remind us all of her great sins, but she is also the woman who worked to make sure that David kept his promise to put Solomon on his throne!

- And finally Joseph is called the husband of Mary, the last of this line of faithful women.

It is in this context that we should read and understand Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting: Her magnificat! Luke 1:46 "And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. 49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name. 50 And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has put down

the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty. 54 He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, 55 As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever."

- Yes Mary was to bare the Seed: The one promised to Abraham!

Now when we consider Mary we must again see the two very dangerous ditches to avoid...

We must avoid the Protestant ditch on the right where Mary has been all but forgotten, and sadly with her the faith of those other important women in the history of God's plan of salvation.

AND we must avoid the Roman or Eastern ditch on the left where Mary is idolized, prayed too and made to be much more Saintly than the Bible presents those whom God uses!

Mary's own magnificat that she proclaimed to her Aunt Elizabeth shows that she was a sinner in need of a Savior and a lowly woman that would be greatly used by God...

- Thus I think it is appropriate and wise to see Mary as a greater Sarah and avoid those ditches on either side of this road!

Now I also mentioned that I think there are lessons in both accounts about obedience and hospitality!

While we see doubts and questions at times in the lives of both women we know that in the end they were faithful to what God called upon them to do!

Mary's obedience came at a great cost to her life and reputation...

- She would face the looks and gossip that would surely follow!
- She would at times be overwhelmed with being the mother of the Messiah as she was at the Temple or later during the ministry of Jesus.
- And of course as Simeon would foretell she would suffer a mother's grief as she watched her own Son crucified as an innocent man!

Surely this is why we can call her the greater Sarah: Sarah brought forth one child in the promised line, but Mary was the mother of God. Sarah would have her life disrupted and carry the responsibility of raising Isaac as a faithful son, but Mary would be thrust in the midst of the greatest battle in the history of the world! And of course Sarah, with her husband Abraham would only be able to look forward in faith to the fulfilment of all of God's promises to them in Jesus, while Mary would see the resurrected Jesus and live to see Him seated in glory at the right hand of the father!

The lesson for us is that it is not for us to know how great or how small the tasks that God calls upon us to do may be...

- It for us to know that we must always obey the voice of the Savior as all of these faithful women did!

And of course with tax season approaching I guess I should mention that I don't think that Roman taxes were any more popular in Israel at that time than the IRS is in many quarters here today. And yet, if Joseph had not obeyed their command to return to his home of origin as part of the house of David to pay those taxes, then Jesus would not have been born in Bethlehem!

- Yes God uses means to accomplish His end, even very unpopular ones!

And finally for this holiday season, I want to mention quickly the hospitality that we see in these accounts...

*[yes, I did say holiday season, because there is nothing wrong with properly referring to a season with Holy days, as long as we are referring to the real Holy days and not something like Black Friday or Ramadan or a Kwanza celebration!]*

**And of course the lessons about hospitality should remind us that our actions must be real as well:**

**Not some drudgery of putting up with family gatherings, but real efforts on our part to be hospitable. This of course should include our gift giving which is intended to reflect on how God is the Great Gift Giver in this season where we remember the gift of His own Son to the world.**

**Now the hospitality is easy to miss in the account from Luke about the birth of Jesus...**

**In fact this is often used to illustrate how awful we are to the poor:**

**Here we have the pregnant Mary turned away and left to deliver the baby Jesus in a stable in a manger!**

**Well, it is actually the account from Genesis that should remind us that there was in fact hospitality shown to this traveling couple in need.**

- **First we need to ask a simple question: Why was there no room for them at the inn?**
- **Was it because the people of Bethlehem would only rent to those with enough money?**

**Did they hate people from Nazareth?**

**No, the fact of the matter was there was no room at the Inn because of the disruptions caused by the Roman edict that folks had to return to the home towns of their ancestors to pay those Roman taxes.**

**Joseph and Mary were coming from quite a distance and would not have been the fastest of travelers with her being ready to deliver.**

**So when they showed up late at night and there was no place for them to stay, do you think they just managed to find an isolated stable and somehow snuck in when no one was watching?**

- **No, as we learn from the account in Genesis chapter 18 and later in the Law, the people of Israel had an obligation to look after travelers and strangers.**

**We are reminded of this when the writer of Hebrews tells us, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.”**

**This is what literally happened with Abraham and Sarah and is likely the example that was followed by whoever owned that stable in Bethlehem.**

**It was not the best of quarters for a pregnant woman, but it was shelter and I like to think it came with a warm meal and whatever provision could be made for a comfortable & safe delivery.**

**I think this because they would likely have followed the example of Abraham and Sarah & I want to leave us with an encouragement to do the same in this joyous season...**

**Our text has Abraham keeping watch in the heat of the day, not because he feared enemies but because in that climate this is when you would be most likely to see someone in need during their travels.**

**Abraham sees these three men and does not give them special treatment because he knows who they are at this point, but rather because he was practicing the kind of hospitality that God’s people are to show.**

**There is no “what are you doing traveling at this time of day” or “I suppose you need some water” with a snarky voice type of comments.**

- **No, Abraham appeals to them to let him serve them!**

**"My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. 4 Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts."**

➤ **And serve them he does!**

**Just listen to the treatment he lays out for strangers and don't worry if you get hungry, lunch is not too far off!**

**6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes." 7 And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. 8 So he took butter and milk & the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate."**

➤ **Refreshing water and Beef and butter and milk and fine bread!**

**May this be an encouragement to all of us as we obey God's command to be hospitable that is still with us today and should be joyously obeyed especially in this season of Advent:**

**I Peter 4: "8 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." 9 Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. 10 As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."**

**Pastor Marc Hays summarized the story of Christmas well this week and concluded with a call to hospitality! He said,**

**"A virgin conceived. A carpenter believed. The baby was born. The King of Kings left his throne and took up residence on his footstool. King Jesus laid down his life, and he took it up again. Wielding a rod of iron, he needed only one swing to both conquer his foe and save his people. In Jesus Christ, we have every reason to rejoice and sing, to eat and drink, and to have ourselves a merry little Christmas."**

**Communion Meditation: Luke 2**

**"8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:**

**14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" 15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. 17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18 And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them."**