



KIAMA ANGLICAN CHURCHES

‘Sonrise’

Sermon – Rod Harding

June 6, 2021

Genesis 16:1-16

Genesis 18:1-15

Both readings are printed in full at the end of this document.

‘Sonrise’

There is something quite magic about the sunrise. If you’re watching, it seems to take longer than you expect and sometimes the moment the sun appears above the horizon is lost because of low clouds; but on the occasions I’ve been watching, I’ve never been disappointed – the sun has always risen, sometimes accompanied by spectacular light and colour, and sometimes just coming slowly into view until you can no longer look at it – but it always comes and, with it, of course, the beginning of a new day.

It's predictable and dependable – it happens like clockwork. It's part of the delicate balance of creation – the amazing way God has set the universe in place – so that every day, everywhere on the planet, the sun rises.

I’ve called this sermon ‘Sonrise’ – with a deliberate misspelling of ‘sun’ – to mark the fact that today, as we bridge across from chapter 16 to chapter 18 of Genesis, we see the arrival of the promised son is both imminent and certain – just like when you are standing on the headland in the gloom of the early morning, waiting for the sun to appear over the ocean. No longer is there any doubt or wondering whether or not God will be true to his promise. Here, in the events of these chapters, we find ourselves standing with Abraham and Sarah, still in the pre-dawn gloom, but knowing with certainty that the son will come, as promised, just as surely as the rising of the sun will come after the darkness of the night.

Genesis 15, which Aiden spoke on last week, was a very ‘up’ time for Abram. In that chapter, God re-affirmed his promise, *‘Count the stars ... so shall your offspring be.’* (15:5), Abram's

expression of faith was '*credited to him as righteousness*' (15:6) and the covenant was 'signed and sealed' by God himself. Abram had been the recipient of an enormous promise, for which the Lord had taken full responsibility – pointing forward to Jesus himself, through whom God would take the curse of the broken covenant on himself, his body broken, suffering death in our place. It was, of course, not only good news for Abram – Genesis 15 contains a message of salvation and hope for all humanity – and we still live in and enjoy the long-term benefits of that message today. As Aiden said last week, 'Abram's story is our story.'

So where would Abram go from there? Surely it can't get much better than that! And it doesn't! It just gets worse. In Abram and Sarai's defense, ten years have passed before we get to the events described in this next chapter. Abram was now 85 (see 16:16), and Sarai just ten years younger than that – and with the advancing years, came advancing impatience. If God was to fulfil his promise, it was essential for Abram to have a son – God had said very clearly, '*A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.*' (Gen 15:4). At 75 years old, Sarai was fast losing any hope of being the mother of that son and heir – it appeared that if Abram was to have a son, she would need to find some other acceptable way for him to do that.

And there was an acceptable way. It sounds somewhat inappropriate and immoral to our sensitivities, but it was clearly a recognised and customary procedure for childless couples of that day to have a child – a childless wife would assign a maidservant to sleep with her husband, become pregnant to him, and then the child would be regarded as the child of the

wife. It would probably have had the same status as adoption today.

So, in our language, Sarai might have said to Abram something like, 'You and I are getting old, dear, and it's been at least ten years since God promised us a son. Do you think we should adopt? After all, we've been married now for a long time; I've never been pregnant and I think it's highly likely that I never will. But if we adopted a boy, then we could get on with making sure that God's promises can be fulfilled. Surely if the Lord was going to do it himself, he'd have done something by now.'

It all sounds so logical and reasonable – especially given that she was 75 years old! It was certainly convincing enough for Abram – he *'agreed to what Sarai said,'* and they went ahead with the plan.

Take note – in the previous chapter, Abram had *'believed the Lord,'* (v.6), and now he has *'agreed to what Sarai said'*. There is a subtle shift – not, of course, that men should not listen to their wives – please don't hear me saying that – but none of us should listen to anything from anyone which contradicts the plan and purpose of God. Where there had once been harmony and friendship, now there was hatred and fear – the relationship between Sarai and Hagar was broken and the two women were now enemies, so that even by the time another 15 years had passed, we find Sarah telling Abraham (in chapter 21:10), *'Get rid of that slave woman and her son.'* Even then, she can't even bring herself to say her name!

But God is not quite so capricious. He pursued Hagar as she attempted to flee to Egypt and instructed her to return to Abram's household, where she was to submit again to her

mistress, Sarai – and he also made her a promise – *‘I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.’* (v.10).

These words are similar, are they not, to the promise already given to Abram. It is as though God was affirming that the baby Hagar was carrying actually IS the one through whom the promise is to be fulfilled. But the word of God's messenger goes on with something of an oracle concerning the future for this child – *‘He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.’* (v.12). The point is, for Ishmael, there is no land! Like the wild donkey, he will have no place of residence, he will wander, experiencing hostility from all around him, and will find settled and permanent relationships hard to establish. It IS a promise and it does show that God is not simply cutting off Hagar and Ishmael – but his future is clearly not the same as that of the one who is to be the fulfillment of God's promise through Abram.

Hagar returned, as directed by God, to the household in Canaan. Abram honoured his mistake by naming the child as his mother had been told and accepting responsibility for the care and protection of them both – but it would not have been easy and, no doubt, both he and Sarai lived every day regretting that they had failed to trust God's promise by taking things into their own hands. Funny that...and certainly worth noting – God does not need our help – just our trust, our patience and our perseverance in faith.

Chapter 18 begins with words that we've seen before (in Genesis 12:7 and 17:1) – *‘The LORD appeared to Abraham ...’*

(v.1). Previously, there has been no detail as to who or what Abraham ‘saw’, but here we are told exactly what happened when the Lord ‘appeared’ to him.

It was the time of siesta, in the early afternoon, described in the text as ‘*in the heat of the day,*’ when it was customary to down tools and take some rest. No doubt Abraham was not the only person who was ‘*sitting at the entrance to his tent*’, retreating to the relative coolness of the tent’s shade, to wait for the intensity of the heat to subside so that work could resume. You can almost imagine the shimmering heat waves rising from the rocks and sands around Mamre – and then, blinking to make certain his eyes were not deceiving him - Abraham became aware of the three men standing in the sun, not far from his tent.

We are not told whether or not he recognised the angelic nature of these men, one of whom is actually identified as ‘*the Lord*’ – but it does seem that he treats them with an excessive desire to please – and we do know that this was not the first time that ‘*the Lord appeared*’ to him.

He immediately hurried to meet the strangers standing near his tent, honouring them as he ‘*bowed low to the ground*’, and urging them to receive his hospitality, offering to fetch water, so that they may wash the grime of travel from their feet and then rest in the shade of the tree until food can be brought for their refreshment. One wonders at how much time would have to elapse while bread was cooked and a young calf was killed, butchered and barbecued in preparation for serving to these sojourning strangers, but it seems that it all happened quickly enough and Abraham was able to present the hastily-prepared

meal to his guests, along with drinks to make the meal complete. Abraham himself then retired from the company, taking the position of a servant, standing close by, ready to intervene should anything require his attention.

The scene is a picture of honour and submission. Abraham honours these three strangers as he, the patriarch and leader of his household, defers to them and elevates them to a position of authority and right. He submits to them, himself taking the role of a servant, to ensure that their every need is met, serving them by staying deliberately ‘behind-the-scenes’. The story is remarkable, as this wealthy, powerful man, no doubt very used to making decisions, giving orders and ensuring that his instructions were carried out, now chooses to become subservient to these strangers, whom we know are representatives of God himself.

It is in this context, after the meal, and when the men are fully satisfied, that Abraham is called forward into the conversation.

“Where is your wife, Sarah?” they asked him.’ (v.9). Clearly it is important that Sarah is also in on the action.

“There, in the tent,” he said.’ It would appear that whatever was ‘special’ about this occasion, Sarah was as equally aware of it as Abraham.

‘Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a son.”’ (v.10).

There it is! The familiar promise, yet again! It had been implied in the promise of chapter 12, made clearer in chapter 15, further clarified in 17, when Abraham had laughed to himself – *“Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah*

bear a child at the age of ninety?” (17:17). But this time, it was Sarah's turn to laugh, with similar incredulity – *“After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” (v.12).*

Her bemused response produced a strong statement about the nature of God and his sovereign power. *‘Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord?’” (vs 13, 14).* It would seem that God had been waiting for this moment, for the time when it was no longer humanly possible, to enact his promise. This is not, in the end, a story about Abraham and Sarah; it is a story about God and his plan for humanity. The question, *“Is anything too hard for the LORD?”* is referenced again in a telling insight into the connection between this story and another long-awaited son – when a different angelic messenger, announcing that Mary, a virgin, is to conceive and give birth to a son, said, *“Nothing is impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37).*

At last, the dawn is imminent – the darkness is beginning to lift and, though the sun has not yet risen, the pre-dawn light predicts its coming. Abraham and Sarah, in this encounter with the Lord, learn finally and completely that God's promise is not restricted by human frailty and limitation. In fact, it is in the face of those very limitations and weaknesses that God's purpose and power can best be seen. It had to get to the point where Abraham and Sarah could no longer make any contribution, and where God alone could be recognised as the one for whom nothing is impossible.

The 'sonrise' of Genesis 18 points forward to another Son, through whom the promises of God will be ultimately fulfilled

as God, by his own power and declared purpose, achieves the possibility of salvation for all humanity, which we have always been totally incapable of achieving on our own. Broken and destroyed, cut off from God, separated from his presence and trapped in our ignorance, we, like Abraham and Sarah, are helpless to contribute. But God has shown that there is nothing too hard for him and, in his grace, mercy and incredible faithfulness, his ‘only begotten Son’ has taken the rejection of the world, your brokenness and mine, on his shoulders, and died in our place that we might find life in him.

Look to the ‘sonrise’ – it is the heart of what this whole story is all about – and look to God, who has achieved, and will always achieve, by his power, not ours, the reconciliation of us and all things to himself and the final restoration of his presence with his people. The Bible narrative ends with John’s magnificent description of the new Jerusalem, where he writes,

‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’ (Rev 21:3).

‘Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.’ (Rev 22:20).

Genesis 16:1-16

16 *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.

⁷ The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. ⁸ And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered.

⁹ Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” ¹⁰ The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

¹¹ The angel of the Lord also said to her:

*“You are now pregnant
and you will give birth to a son.*

*You shall name him Ishmael,
for the Lord has heard of your misery.*

*¹² He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone’s hand against him,*

*and he will live in hostility
toward all his brothers.”*

¹³ She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” ¹⁴ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Genesis 18:1-15

***18** 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.”

⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”

⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and

set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

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.”

© Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society

All rights reserved worldwide