

Series: "Genesis...The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Who Would Have Thought?"

Text: Genesis 21:1-7

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- Gender reveals have become a thing these days. Some, trying to top everyone else, have accidentally blown up cars, started forest fires and even killed people when they have gotten out of control.
- We didn't have gender reveals but we did have less dramatic "we-are-having-a-baby" reveals. Those were very special times when we first found out and then when we could tell others a baby was on the way. I think we usually waited until there were just 7 months before the expected birthdate to go public with out joy in a general way.
- Imagine Abraham and Sarah. We know how desperately Abraham wants a baby—a son of his own to carry on the family lineage.
- When he was 75 years old and he and Sarah had not had any children of their own, the LORD had made a promise to him that he would make him into a "great nation." This at least implied a son to carry on the family name.
- Then, more than a decade later when Abraham was 86 years old, the LORD made an explicit promise. Abraham was bemoaning to the LORD his continuing childlessness and the fact that this meant Eliezer of Damascus a servant in the household would be his legal heir.
- The LORD said, *"This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."*
- This was both a birth and a gender reveal "party" from the true source of all human babies that are ever born. There was no chance of a false positive on the home pregnancy test or a misread of the details of the ultrasound.
- Abraham was going to have a baby and that baby would be a son and would be his long desired heir! Send up the cloud of blue smoke for the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perremites and all those living in the Promised Land to see!!

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- The first inkling of this promise from God came when Abraham was 75. It was difficult for Mary and I to wait 9 months. Admittedly, it was more difficult for her than for me. Nine months seemed so long to wait for the birth. How about 25 years?
- From the clear promise of a boy to be born until the birth of that baby was no less than 14 years!
- *"Oh! That's wonderful Abraham and Sarah! You are finally being blessed with a baby! Oh, how sweet, it will be the little boy you have always wanted, Abe! When is Sarah due? Ahhhhh, 14 years from now."*
- Actually, the expectant parents would have had to answer truthfully, *"We don't know when the baby is due."*
- And so, the **twin** lesson of the faith lesson in Genesis is taught one more time: ***faith*** in the LORD cannot be separated from ***waiting*** on the LORD. ***Faith in God and waiting are... inexorably, inevitably, predictably, unchangeably, relentlessly, obviously, inescapably... linked.***
- I like a happy birth story. I cried tears of joy at the births of each of my children. I cry when I watch *Call the Midwife* and a pretend baby is born on TV. The birth story in *Genesis 22* is a happy one—no emergency C-section—no Pitocin—no forceps. At least we are not told of any complications that might have been more likely for this—well—nothing less than *"geriatric birth."*
- But, the lack of the medical details and the inclusion of some other details should probably make us look for what it is that Moses does emphasize as he writes the narrative. Let's do that in *Genesis 21*—verses 1-7. **READ Genesis 21:1-7**
- In those first verses, Moses reminds us of a number of truths about the LORD he has already taught.

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- The LORD is a gracious. The LORD still can bless people who trust him even if they sometimes struggle with believing that there is *nothing to wonderful for the LORD—nothing too hard for the Lord to do*. In his graciousness, the LORD blesses even a person who laughed a bit at the spectacular size of his promise and lied about it as had Sarah.
- The graciousness of the LORD provides the blessing—provides the empowerment to keep his promises. The Lord is a promise keeper.
- Again, a side note, for our day and time not for the Israelites about to enter the Promised Land who were reading this when Moses wrote it, I am reminded that it is the LORD who controls the conception of human babies—every birth.
- Even we believers often try to make our plans for having a family around what seem to be convenient circumstances for us. In our times, we have what we have called "birth **control**." Did you hear that second word in the nomenclature? "**control**."
- When that so-called "human control" proves ineffectual or inconvenient, some use what they think to be the ultimate **control** over life giving. We call it "abortion." It makes some humans feel like they are in the place of God in the matter of human conception. They are not. We are not.
- God is in control of the conception of all life as he was in control here with Sarah's pregnancy and the birth of her son.
- Notice the two things Moses emphasizes at the end of verse 2. **First**, Abraham is an "old man," even by the standard of the day, when this son is born. Sarah was old as well but the focus is on Abraham because the focus is on the promise made to him. The point is he was old—it took a long time for the promise to be fulfilled. There was waiting involved with the faith in God's promise.

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- Then **second**, the baby came at the very time God had promised the baby would come. There is a bit of a wink-wink with this statement. Back in chapter 18, when the three visitors showed up before the destruction of Sodom, Abraham was told Sarah is now pregnant and will deliver a son in the coming year.
- Now we are talking the 9-month time of waiting. However, just like we could hardly read this and not remember the earlier promises—a vague one 25 years ago and an explicit one 14 years ago—the readers will also remember these promises.
- Now the exact timing that is emphasized here takes on a bigger dimension of God fulfilling his promises in the exact timing of his choice. That 14 year wait was not because God was trying to figure out how to do it but because it was all part of his exact plan that faith and waiting were to go together.
- So, theologically verses 1 and 2 remind us of some big ideas of who God is and how he allows humans to be part of his plan. God is the gracious, promise-keeping God who is perfectly able to bless people of faith in unimaginable ways even after long periods of waiting by fulfilling HIS promises at exactly the right time so that they carry out HIS plan in HIS way allowing humans to participate and thus live out their created purpose to glorify God.
- Look again at how the human recipient, Abraham, responds in verses 3 and 4. Back in chapter 17 after the Hagar incident and the institution of the unforgettable covenant symbol of circumcision, Abraham laughed at the idea that he could still produce a son. In chapter 18, Sarah, overhearing the promise to Abraham, laughed at the idea that she could still bear a baby boy.
- The whole narrative is tied together with "**laughter.**" When he laughed, the LORD tells Abraham to name his son "**Isaac**" which can

mean, depending on the vowels that are read, he laughs, he will laugh, or simply laughter.

- Now, here in the 3rd verse of chapter 21, Abraham knows the point, obeys and does indeed name his son—laughter—that is "Isaac."
- Laughter over a bit of disbelief in the *humanly* unthinkable way that the LORD promised to work now turns to laughter over joy because there is nothing too hard for the LORD to do to keep his promises.
- Mary and I named our *Isaac* for this very reason when he was given to us after a number of miscarriages and a full term stillbirth. We laughed when he was born—we laughed out of joy because we knew that truly nothing was too hard for the LORD. We held the proof in our hands.
- Moses not only obeyed the LORD with the naming but he also obeyed in the command of circumcision. Moses makes it clear that the response to LORD's faithfulness in fulfilling his humanly unthinkable promises is never to forget God now you have something you want. The response to God's promises is to obey God.
- In verse five, Moses provides a clear indicator of his focus in a way he has done for other passages. It is in the form of a declarative statement that says something like "*Hey, if you haven't caught this yet, Abraham was 100 years old when this promised baby, Isaac, was born to fulfill the LORD's promise perfectly. Abraham was a really old guy which means the LORD fulfilled His promise in a way that humans would not normally expect after a long time of waiting in faith... (at least faith some of the time even when it was yet imperfect and brought a chuckle of disbelief or a disastrous human plan to fix things when it was taking too long for the promise to come).*"

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- And, by the way, next time God let's me teach from *Genesis* we will see the bookend to the Hagar incident. The laughter of joy over Isaac's birth is tainted by the sadness of the consequences of humans trying to make God's plan work from their limited perspective.
- We just don't know all we need to know to tell what the future should be and to be certain of our abilities to make it happen. I know it is painful to wait. But it is ultimately destructive when we switch from faith in God's promise to faith in our human plans even when we are trying to "get God's work done for Him."
- Sarah sees the point and Moses uses her words to reinforce it. God in his time has made me laugh for a new reason—he has brought me "a renewed laughter"—The LORD has brought me "Isaac!"
- When you hear about this laughing—laugh with me. Laugh with me for my unbelief but laugh with me more for God's grace and his power to keep his promises his way.
- Laugh with me when you read about how I messed this up with my human Hagar plan.
- Laugh with me as you learn again that faith and waiting are inseparable in God's plan but the passing of time does not make anything "too hard" for the LORD.
- Laugh with me when you realize no one would have expected Abraham and Sarah could ever have a child after all this time—that would be impossible!
- Laugh with me for JOY when you realize along with me that nothing is impossible for the LORD in whom we trust!
- Her final point? Abraham was an impossibly old man with an impossibly old wife BUT the LORD surprised us all with the impossible!

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- ***"Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?"***
- But then, who would have said the earth will flood but I will keep you safe through the torrents and currents?
- Or who would have said I'll send a young Joseph to Egypt move him from slavery and prison to make him a counselor to Pharaoh and allow him to save the Egyptians and the family of Abraham Isaac and Jacob in a famine
- Or, I'll lead my people from the might of Egypt's armies and crush their pursuers in the sea
- Or I'll send a cloud by day and a fire by night that will guide my people
- Or, who would have said, the Creator God would come and shows his glorious presence to a wandering people with a gold box in a tent in the desert
- Or who would have said the Lord will tear down the indestructible walls of a city and give his people the victory
- Or who would have said the Lord will spare a Canaanite woman named Rahab who will then become a mother in the line of the kings of Israel and the messiah himself
- Or along with Rahab who would have said God will probably work through the mess of Tamar's life, the desolate situation of Ruth the Moabitess and then Bathsheba the adulteress to bring about his promises of redemption
- Or who would have said, I'll pick the ruddy little guy to be king and use him in my plan in spite of his lying, adultery and murder
- Or, in Isaiah's day who would have said the crazy things that prophet is saying are God's ways not the soothing things these others tell us

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- Or who would have said, God will send Daniel ahead of the Israelites to be the one who arranges for a return with the blessing of a pagan king
- Or, who would have said, and all unexpected possibilities that God has used through human history to accomplish his plan point forward and backward to this one...who would have said
 - God will redeem the world through a solitary man named Jesus of Nazareth
 - Born of an unmarried virgin and thus illegitimate from the start by the expectations of the world
 - Born in the middle of history rather than at some logical beginning or end
 - Born poor and powerless in the thinking of most
 - Born as a loser from Nazareth
- Or who would have said God would redeem the world by become incarnate—fully God—fully human—
- And then who would have said God would die on a cross to somehow substitute his perfect life for the broken sinful lives of every other human
- Who would have said that this same Jesus—God incarnate—Messiah would then be raised from the dead and come back to his own bringing a new form of life for them to live in the world
- Who would have said that a blue collar fisherman denier like Peter would be a leader in a new nation of priests to bless the world
- Or Paul a Jew of Jews would become the lover of Gentiles in Jesus' name
- Or a a new body of Jew and Gentile together—all peoples' tribes and nations would become the body of the Messiah in the world

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- Or who would say that someday a new Jerusalem will come down from the heavens and dwell on this earth and God will be the light of the world
- Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Well, now her question, as impossible as the idea may have seemed to her, becomes small in the light of some of these other "who would have said—who would have ever thought ways that God works."
- There is a reason whole final chapters of the book of *Job*, which we sang parts of some moments ago, are taken up with Job learning the truth that we humans just can't comprehend how wonderfully knowing and powerful our God is when it comes to fulfilling his promises.
- *Were you there Job when I laid the foundations? Job, can you even tell me when the mountain goat gives birth hidden high on the rocky crags?*
- We can't even imagine all he is able to do and all he will do yet we make our human plans and sometimes hold them like they are as certain as the word of the LORD.
- There is a reason the LORD through Isaiah the prophet must again teach God's people—the children of Abraham—"***My ways are not your ways!***" It is because humans often forget that God has ways we can't even imagine.
- And we forget our pragmatic ways of helping God get his promises done because we feel like we are the last resort and it depends on us are very often ways that make us feel significant rather than point out God's glories.
- Our flesh wants to be in control by knowing all and getting everything right and we forget we don't and we can't.

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- Who would have thought? Who would have thunk it?—says Sarah as she cuddles a humanly impossible baby of faith that required a great deal of waiting??
- But, Raleigh, maybe this is just about those big, special parts of God's plan. Maybe the rest of us, you know, the normal everyday stuff we are smart enough and capable enough to take care of, maybe that is still up to us.
- I get what you are asking, and if I can say this politely I would say, "I bet Abraham and Sarah kept doing what humans think it takes for humans to make a baby. But, at least by this point, Sarah knows they didn't make Isaac. God did!
- And, to make that point God waited a long time so that Isaac became one of those "who would have thought?" works of God.
- What if we moved and breathed each day in every way holding on to the truth that we need to trust God for all of it—not just the big stuff like Pharaoh and his pursuing chariots or Jesus leaving the tomb?
- I'm not telling you I do this. I'm not sure I am even close. I **am** sure *Genesis* makes me think about this truth and how it applies in my life and our life together every single day.
- I do know this. When I get it and I walk in this truth, I am less afraid because whatever success is, it is not all on my shoulders. I am less afraid even when someone tells me it is "urgent" that I get it right and get it right, right now. I know God knows the exact right way and the exact best timing.
- When I get it and walk in this truth, there are times I then recognize that I have not limited God to working in only the ways I can imagine and pull off and then God surprises me with a "who would have thought truth" only he could know and do.
- Let's think about this together as we think about moving as a church.

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- It is not easy. It is not always comfortable because what I am talking about is having faith that God knows the perfect how and the perfect when. AND, as I said, faith like this always seems to come with some waiting.
- Waiting in faith, even for a short time let alone 25 years, is not easy when we live in a culture of *instantaneousness*. It is not easy when different people and our view of circumstances are shouting "urgent!," urgent!"
- It's not easy, but that is when God seems to do his most "who would have ever thought" demonstrations of his wisdom and power.