

In the Beginning: Genesis 1 to 25

Week 4

Monday, March 27th

Genesis 15

1Afterward the LORD spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great."

2But Abram replied, "O Sovereign LORD, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since I don't have a son, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. 3You have given me no children, so one of my servants will have to be my heir."

4Then the LORD said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own to inherit everything I am giving you." 5Then the LORD brought Abram outside beneath the night sky and told him, "Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that--too many to count!" 6And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD declared him righteous because of his faith. 7Then the LORD told him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land."

8But Abram replied, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that you will give it to me?"

9Then the LORD told him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10Abram took all these and killed them. He cut each one down the middle and laid the halves side by side. He did not, however, divide the birds in half. 11Some vultures came down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away. 12That evening, as the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep. He saw a terrifying vision of darkness and horror.

13Then the LORD told Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, and they will be oppressed as slaves for four hundred years. 14But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. 15(But you will die in peace, at a ripe old age.) 16After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, when the sin of the Amorites has run its course."

17As the sun went down and it became dark, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. 18So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River-- 19the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, 20Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."

Points of Interest:

- 'when I don't even have a son?'—All of these things God is promising sound really good, but Abram is getting to be an older man. He won't have much time to see or enjoy these benefits, and he has no one to pass them on to.
- 'a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth'—since he has no children and his relatives live far away, Abram has made one of his servants the beneficiary of his will.
- 'Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD declared him righteous because of his faith'—I think that this is exactly what God has been looking for all along. Righteous basically means, 'being in a right relationship with God.' And Abram is a great example of what God wants from people in a relationship with him: he's looking for people who will trust him, and be willing to listen to him, even if their own eyes are telling them something different. It's not complicated, but it's also not easy. Over and over again,

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we've seen people who make the opposite choice: Eve who eats the fruit, following the recommendation of the serpent and her own judgment; Cain who decides to kill his brother rather than master sin, as God had recommended; the sons of God who took wives as they wanted from among the daughters of earth; the Babylonians, who built a tower in order to resist God's command to spread out and fill the earth. They do what seems good to them—essentially tasting of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil over and over again—and each time it leads them into greater misery. We have also had a couple of examples of people who've decided to trust God: Enoch, who never experiences death; and Noah, whose family is rescued from cataclysm. Abram follows in their footsteps, believing that God will give him good things and resisting the temptation to grab them for himself. Abram doesn't have to do much to prove his worth to God; all God asks is that Abram believe in his goodness.

- 'who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land'—God has been preparing him for this moment before he even spoke to him. Terah brought Abram from Ur to Haran; then, God called him the rest of the way.
- 'how can I be sure that you will give it to me?'—it's reassuring to know that believing God and being counted as righteous doesn't mean that Abram doesn't have doubts or questions. Abram is willing to believe God, but he needs assurance; and God is happy to give him that assurance.
- 'a terrifying vision of darkness and horror'—I wonder if this terrifying vision is a little taste of the empty chaos that was there before God began his creative work. Maybe God is showing Abram where the world has come from before he shows him where it is going.
- 'when the sin of the Amorites has run its course'—'Amorites' is another name for the Canaanites. God is in a relationship with them also, and he's working a plan in that relationship. Abram is being asked to wait 400 years for the fulfillment of the promise to inherit the land, because God thinks that's the fair amount of time to give the Canaanites to turn away from their sin. It seems that God is pretty certain that they won't, but he still gives them the chance.
- 'a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses'—it's a little uncertain why God appears as smoke and fire, but it seems that what he is doing is calling a curse upon himself if he does not fulfill his promise to Abram. There is some evidence that passing between the two halves of a sacrifice was an oath-taking ritual of the time.
- 'LORD made a covenant with Abram that day'—a covenant is an agreement or treaty between two parties. Apart from the Bible, we know most about these covenants from archaeological recoveries of covenants between a king and his vassal lords. Those covenants consist of a list of the king's titles, followed by a history of his great deeds of the past, followed by a list of requirements for the vassal. In this covenant between Abram and God, nothing is asked of Abram; God instead makes promises about his own future behavior. This covenant is God's answer to Abram's request for assurance. God does not give Abram proof or immediate answers; but he does show his seriousness by going through the ritual of this covenant. By assuring Abram in this way, God sets things up such that Abram must continue to live in faith; but he also shows that he is invested in Abram's future. God is not just making empty promises to Abram; he is willing to stake his reputation on their fulfillment.

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Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Even though Abram believed in God's promises, he wasn't above asking God for reassurance; and God was very willing to give Abram the assurances he needed. Are you having a hard time holding on to a promise God has given you for yourself or your family? Ask God to give you some sort of sign that he remembers his promise.
- *For our church:* A really important part of Abram's relationship with God, one that it's easy to overlook, is that God and Abram actually communicate with one another: God speaks to Abram in words and visions; Abram asks questions in return; and God responds. Pray that God would take our church to a new level of communication with him. Pray for more words from God and more visions from him. Pray that we would have ears to hear what God is saying to us, and pray that God would quickly and clearly answer when we call out to him.
- *For our city:* At the beginning of this passage, Abram becomes disheartened when he sees the huge gap between his hopes and his current reality. Then, God raises Abram's head and gives him a glimpse of the intentions he has for him. For us too, it can sometimes be discouraging to see what our city is like when we know how much better it could be. If you are feeling that way, ask God to give you an encouraging glimpse of our city's destiny in God.

Tuesday, March 28th

Genesis 16

1But Sarai, Abram's wife, had no children. So Sarai took her servant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, 2and gave her to Abram so she could bear his children. "The LORD has kept me from having any children," Sarai said to Abram. "Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her." And Abram agreed. 3So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. (This happened ten years after Abram first arrived in the land of Canaan.)

4So Abram slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress Sarai with contempt. 5Then Sarai said to Abram, "It's all your fault! Now this servant of mine is pregnant, and she despises me, though I myself gave her the privilege of sleeping with you. The LORD will make you pay for doing this to me!"

6Abram replied, "Since she is your servant, you may deal with her as you see fit." So Sarai treated her harshly, and Hagar ran away.

7The angel of the LORD found Hagar beside a desert spring along the road to Shur. 8The angel said to her, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I am running away from my mistress," she replied.

9Then the angel of the LORD said, "Return to your mistress and submit to her authority." 10The angel added, "I will give you more descendants than you can count." 11And the angel also said, "You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard about your misery. 12This son of yours will be a wild one--free and untamed as a wild donkey! He will be against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live at odds with the rest of his brothers."

13Thereafter, Hagar referred to the LORD, who had spoken to her, as "the God who sees me," for she said, "I have seen the One who sees me!" 14Later that well was named Beer-lahairoi, and it can still be found between Kadesh and Bered.

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15So Hagar gave Abram a son, and Abram named him Ishmael. 16Abram was eighty-six years old at that time.

Points of Interest:

- 'gave her to Abram so she could bear his children'—servants were considered legal extensions of their mistresses; so any work done by the servant, even including having a child, would be considered to have been done on behalf of the mistress (*IVP Bible Background Commentary*). While Sarai's plan has legal legitimacy, it strikes me that even in a different culture from ours it wouldn't work smoothly and simply in the realm of human relationships. This plan is hatched out of desperation: Sarai knows that the success of their family—and even the fulfillment of the promises of God—depend on Abram having an heir, but she's been unable to provide him with one. As a last resort, she turns to her maid. In the last passage, God promised that it is his responsibility to provide Abram with an heir, but Sarai takes the burden of the fulfillment of that promise on herself.
- 'And Abram agreed'—Abram's amicable silence on this very important issue reminds me of Adam's non-participation in the decision about eating the fruit. Husbands and wives were created to be helpers and partners to one another; here, like in the garden of Eden, they fail one another. Sarai leads Abram in the wrong direction, and Abram doesn't give Sarai the support or counsel she needs.
- 'This happened ten years after Abram first arrived in the land of Canaan'—while it's easy to think that Abram and Sarai are foolish to disbelieve God's dramatic promise of provision, it's worth noting that they've been waiting a long time for God to give them an heir—and, as the saying goes, they're not getting any younger. It's tough to wait ten years, knowing every minute that your hope is becoming more and more unlikely to come true. I don't know if I could make it nearly as long as Sarai and Abram did.
- 'she began to treat her mistress Sarai with contempt'—as predicted, reality is different from the legal theory. It's clear that, no matter what the law says, this child is Hagar's. Because she has the child, Hagar finds herself to be superior to her mistress.
- 'It's all your fault!'—just like in the garden of Eden, the immediate result of their choice is blame-shifting. If I'm remembering correctly, Sarai played some role in this situation, but now she's placing all the blame on Abram.
- 'you may deal with her as you see fit'—Abram remains strangely withdrawn, and he too shifts the blame completely back to Sarai.
- 'Return to your mistress'—the angel is probably protecting Sarai's dignity here. This whole episode is full of embarrassment for Sarai: first, she is unable to have a child herself; then her maid is almost immediately able to get pregnant; and finally the servant runs away.
- 'I will give you more descendants than you can count'—while the angel is sensitive to Sarai's dignity, he is also careful not to make Hagar pay for the mistakes of Abram and Sarai. On God's behalf, he pronounces a blessing on Hagar and on her son. Her son will grow and thrive, and he will experience a portion of the promise God has for Abram's children: he will be the forefather of a great nation.
- 'Ishmael, for the LORD has heard about your misery'—Ishmael means, 'God hears' (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*). God's concern for Ishmael does not come merely from his relationship with Abram. He is also paying attention to Hagar for her own sake: he has heard about the hardness of her life—maybe the recent tensions with

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Sarai, and maybe the difficulty of a life of servanthood; he cares about Hagar; and he wants to bless her and her son.

- 'a wild one--free and untamed'—perhaps fulfilling one of Hagar's hopes. She is a servant, but her son will be completely and totally free.
- 'the God who sees me'—Hagar ran away in misery, but she returns with an awareness that God hears her and sees her.
- 'that well was named Beer-lahairoi'—that is, 'the Well of the Living One who sees me' (The New Oxford Annotated Bible).

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Abram and Sarai decide to give God a little helping hand in this passage, coming up with their own way of making his promise more or less come true. Of course, it ends up being nothing like God had intended for them. It doesn't do them or God any good for them to pretend that the Hagar Plan is a satisfying fulfillment of their hopes. Are you considering a course of action that you know deep-down is a bad short-cut toward something God has promised you? Ask God to give you the strength and the clarity to resist that short-cut, and boldly insist that God himself fully deliver what he has promised you.
- *For our church:* In this passage, we see yet another example of the failure of a community: Abram, Sarai, and Hagar were created to be helpers and partners to one another, but instead they harm and hinder one another. Pray for the community life in our church. Pray that God would be healing hurts and disappointments and that he would give us the ability to be true helpers, partners, and encouragers to one another.
- *For our city:* Hagar's life is changed because she has an encounter with God. It is one of the most difficult moments of her life, but she comes out of it amazed and encouraged because of her new confidence that God sees her and hears her. Pray that people all around our city would have similar encounters with God. Pray particularly for people who are in trouble or discouraged, that they would know that God sees them and hears them.

Wednesday, March 29th

Genesis 17: 1-14

1When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; serve me faithfully and live a blameless life. 2I will make a covenant with you, by which I will guarantee to make you into a mighty nation." 3At this, Abram fell face down in the dust. Then God said to him, 4"This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of not just one nation, but a multitude of nations! 5What's more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram; now you will be known as Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. 6I will give you millions of descendants who will represent many nations. Kings will be among them!

7"I will continue this everlasting covenant between us, generation after generation. It will continue between me and your offspring forever. And I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you. 8Yes, I will give all this land of Canaan to you and to your offspring forever. And I will be their God.

9"Your part of the agreement," God told Abraham, "is to obey the terms of the covenant. You and all your descendants have this continual responsibility. 10This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Each male among you must be circumcised; 11the flesh of his foreskin must be cut off. This will be a sign that you and

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they have accepted this covenant. 12Every male child must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. This applies not only to members of your family, but also to the servants born in your household and the foreign-born servants whom you have purchased. 13All must be circumcised. Your bodies will thus bear the mark of my everlasting covenant. 14Anyone who refuses to be circumcised will be cut off from the covenant family for violating the covenant."

Points of Interest:

- 'When Abram was ninety-nine years old'—for those who are counting, this passage happens **thirteen years** after the end of yesterday's. God continues to leave them in a place of waiting for quite a bit longer.
- 'I will make you the father of not just one nation, but a multitude of nations'—God has not even come close to fulfilling the previous promise, and now he increases it by a whole order of magnitude. Abram will not just be the father of one nation, but of a multitude of nations. Perhaps God is simply acknowledging his promise to Hagar: now both Ishmael and Sarai's future child will be the forefathers of great nations. Two doesn't seem like a multitude, though. I wonder if God's promises work by a law of cumulative interest. If we invest some money in a retirement account and don't touch it for a long time, even at a relatively modest interest rate the account will grow dramatically by the time we actually use it. Maybe God's promises work the same way: Abram has been waiting patiently (at least relatively patiently) for a long time without cashing in his promise, and it's grown dramatically in God's promise account.
- 'now you will be known as Abraham'—this renaming is probably meant to signify God's adoption of Abraham (IVP Bible Background Commentary) or a recognition of Abraham's change of status (The New Oxford Annotated Bible). In any case, it's a way of permanently commemorating this moment. The slight change in name brings a slight change of meaning, from 'Exalted Father' to 'Father of Many.'
- 'Your part of the agreement'—now Abram is asked to do something. However, it's not as if what is required of him in any way concretely contributes to the fulfillment of the promise; nor does it really benefit God in any way. I think the intention of adding the rite of circumcision is to give Abraham a concrete way to choose, for himself and his family, to participate in the covenant. Abraham is not merely a passive recipient of God's rewards, but an invested partner in the promises.
- 'must be circumcised'—believe it or not, circumcision is and was a fairly common ritual. In most cultures, however, it's a puberty rite (which both makes some sense and sounds more painful). Here, it's a ritual associated with birth, the significance of which is that the children of Abraham and his family are essentially born into the covenant. All it takes is a child's parents making the decision when the child is 8 years old.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Have you been waiting for something from God for a long time? Perhaps it's good news that he hasn't given it to you yet. It may be that God hasn't given you what he originally promised because he's been improving it. If you are able, praise God in the expectation that he's preparing something even better for you. God's promises grow with time—they don't shrink.
- *For our church:* We're a young and fast-paced church, used to things happening quickly. But sometimes God's promises can take a surprisingly long time to come to fruition. Ask God to increase our patience and to give us the strength of character to wait well.

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- *For our city:* Abraham is sometimes called the father of the faithful. One of the ways that he is the father of a multitude of nations is by becoming the honorary parent of anyone and anyplace that imitates his life of faith. Pray for our city that we would join Abraham's family and share in Abraham's inheritance.

Thursday, March 30th

Genesis 17: 15-27

15Then God added, "Regarding Sarai, your wife--her name will no longer be Sarai; from now on you will call her Sarah. 16And I will bless her and give you a son from her! Yes, I will bless her richly, and she will become the mother of many nations. Kings will be among her descendants!"

17Then Abraham bowed down to the ground, but he laughed to himself in disbelief. "How could I become a father at the age of one hundred?" he wondered. "Besides, Sarah is ninety; how could she have a baby?" 18And Abraham said to God, "Yes, may Ishmael enjoy your special blessing!"

19But God replied, "Sarah, your wife, will bear you a son. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my everlasting covenant with him and his descendants. 20As for Ishmael, I will bless him also, just as you have asked. I will cause him to multiply and become a great nation. Twelve princes will be among his descendants. 21But my covenant is with Isaac, who will be born to you and Sarah about this time next year."

22That ended the conversation, and God left Abraham. 23On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and every other male in his household and circumcised them, cutting off their foreskins, exactly as God had told him. 24Abraham was ninety-nine years old at that time, 25and Ishmael his son was thirteen. 26Both were circumcised the same day, 27along with all the other men and boys of the household, whether they were born there or bought as servants.

Points of Interest:

- 'from now on you will call her Sarah'—Sarah too gets a new name. She is as much a part of this covenant as Abraham. For her too, this is a moment to remember. Both Sarai and Sarah mean, 'princess.'
- 'Yes, I will bless her richly, and she will become the mother of many nations'—it is not enough to God that Abram has a child. Sarah must have one too. Abraham can't get to his promise by leaving Sarah behind. They will see the fulfillment of the promise together.
- 'he laughed to himself in disbelief'—perhaps Abraham was relieved that he finally had a son, and that God had acted to make sure that Hagar did not run away with that son. He seems to have settled into the idea that Ishmael was the fulfillment of God's promise, and the idea of going back into the place of waiting is so overwhelming that he breaks out laughing.
- 'may Ishmael enjoy your special blessing!'—I think Abraham is basically saying, 'Let's just call this good enough.'
- 'But my covenant is with Isaac'—while granting Abraham's request that God bless Ishmael, God remains committed to working out his plan of blessing for the world through Sarah's future child.
- 'about this time next year'—mercifully, God does begin to make his promise more specific in this dialogue with Abraham: he tells them that the child will be a boy; he suggests a name; and, most significantly, he gives them the timeline of one year.

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- 'exactly as God had told him'—despite Abraham's reservations and his laughter, he does indeed sign himself up for this covenant. Once again, he makes the choice to trust God and his promises, even to make the crazy, impractical, and painful decision to have his whole household circumcised.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Do you have nicknames for one another in your family or your household? Nicknames are usually a sign of affection, a way of highlighting a favorite trait, or a way of showing how well we know someone. Sometimes nicknames have stories behind them too. Remembering fondly how or when the nickname came about is one of the things that bonds us to one another. In the past two passages, we've seen that God likes to give nicknames too, pretty much for these same reasons. Do you think God might have a nickname for you? What is it, and how and when did he give it to you? Take a moment to thank God for having such a special, personal relationship with you. If you don't know whether or not God has a nickname for you but it sounds attractive, tell him that that's the kind of relationship with him that you hope for; then, listen to hear if he says anything in return.
- *For our church:* In this passage, Abraham essentially tells God, 'What you've given me already is good enough.' Abraham wants to settle in, to consolidate what he already has. But God has much bigger things in store for him. Pray that God would make us the kind of church that is always saying, 'Yes!' when God calls us to bigger things. To many of us, this idea of starting a second site in Boston seems like it might be just such an opportunity. We as a church could be tempted to settle into our new building, but perhaps God is saying to us, 'I did not intend for you just to fill a building, but to play a part in bringing my goodness and abundance to all of Boston.' If this is indeed God's leading, pray that we as an entire church would have the faith to move forward, and ask God to give us all we need to make this step.
- *For our city:* In this passage, God begins to make his promises for Abraham more specific: he tells Abraham the gender and name of the child he and Sarah will have, and when they will have it. Ask God if he has any specific promises for Boston. What are those things, and when can we expect them to happen?

Friday, March 31st

Genesis 18: 1-15

1The LORD appeared again to Abraham while he was camped near the oak grove belonging to Mamre. One day about noon, as Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent, 2he suddenly noticed three men standing nearby. He got up and ran to meet them, welcoming them by bowing low to the ground. 3"My lord," he said, "if it pleases you, stop here for a while. 4Rest in the shade of this tree while my servants get some water to wash your feet. 5Let me prepare some food to refresh you. Please stay awhile before continuing on your journey."

"All right," they said. "Do as you have said."

6So Abraham ran back to the tent and said to Sarah, "Quick! Get three measures of your best flour, and bake some bread." 7Then Abraham ran out to the herd and chose a fat calf and told a servant to hurry and butcher it. 8When the food was ready, he took some cheese curds and milk and the roasted meat, and he served it to the men. As they ate, Abraham waited on them there beneath the trees.

9"Where is Sarah, your wife?" they asked him.

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"In the tent," Abraham replied.

10Then one of them said, "About this time next year I will return, and your wife Sarah will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening to this conversation from the tent nearby. 11And since Abraham and Sarah were both very old, and Sarah was long past the age of having children, 12she laughed silently to herself. "How could a worn-out woman like me have a baby?" she thought. "And when my master--my husband--is also so old?"

13Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, 'Can an old woman like me have a baby?'" 14Is anything too hard for the LORD? About a year from now, just as I told you, I will return, and Sarah will have a son." 15Sarah was afraid, so she denied that she had laughed. But he said, "That is not true. You did laugh."

Points of Interest:

- 'he suddenly noticed three men standing nearby'—Moses describes this as an appearance of the LORD, but it is three men. It could be that God is being represented by three men, once again—as in chapter one—hinting that God, like humanity, might have some diversity in the midst of unity: one God represented by three people. On the other hand, he could simply have some angelic companions. I think that in this case the following story (particularly tomorrow's passage) most easily lends itself to the idea that God has brought two angelic friends along.
The fact that he noticed them suddenly seems to mean that they appeared literally out of nowhere.
- 'welcoming them by bowing low to the ground'—a sign of respect.
- 'Let me prepare some food to refresh you'—the standard polite expectation regarding hospitality is that you would offer some refreshment to anyone who passes your way. So, what Abraham is saying here is simply what would be culturally expected of him. In the end, he prepares a more lavish feast than one usually would for a passing guest. After all, it's quite an honor to have God (and possibly some angels) drop by your house for a visit.
- 'she laughed silently to herself'—Sarah's laugh feels to me as if it has something of a cynical or bitter edge: she's heard this one too many times before. She is an old, worn-out woman, by her own estimation, and she can't handle the fact that God keeps casting her as an expectant mother.
- 'Sarah was afraid, so she denied that she had laughed'—Sarah is caught in an awkward moment. Not only is she caught in her eavesdropping, but she's also caught laughing at God's promises. Startled and unprepared, she simply tries to deny the whole thing. I wonder what would have happened if she had told God what she was thinking and feeling.
- 'That is not true. You did laugh'—Sarah at least has plausible deniability here: her laugh was silent, after all. Is a silent laugh really a laugh? God doesn't let her wriggle out on a technicality, though. He doesn't particularly seem interested in punishing her or correcting her, but it's important to him that she know that he knows that she laughed at him.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* I love the fact that God sits down to have dinner with Abraham. He even waits around as Abraham gets the meal prepared, just so that he can spend time with him. God seems to really enjoy spending time with his people. Today, as you go about your day together, as a family, as a household, or a single

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person, invite God to join you. Consider specifically asking God to join you for dinner. It might even be fun to set a plate for him, to really show him that he's welcome and to remind yourself that he is there.

- *For our church:* God has made big promises, to the whole world and even specifically to our church. Some of those promises seem just as far or farther off now than they did when he made them. God promised that the Holy Spirit would be poured out on everyone, that dreams and visions and prophecies would be as common as water, that Jesus would bring peace and justice to the world and especially to the poor. For our church, he told us to dream of being 10,000 people, of starting 200 new churches, of bringing God's supernatural power to the city of Boston in a dramatic way, of making a real difference in the lives of the poor and downtrodden in our city. It's easy to become cynical or dismissive as we continue to talk about these dreams, even while they remain far from our reality. Pray that God would save us from this cynicism, and that he would bless us with tenacity to continue to expect these things from him.
- *For our city:* To me, this passage is a great picture of what we sometimes call the naturally supernatural. The spiritual world breaks in on our natural world; Abraham and Sarah actually see, hear, and talk to God, and perhaps a couple of angels. It's not strange and scary and otherworldly, though; God and the angels actually participate in a fairly normal way in the normal life of Abraham and Sarah. Pray that the people of our city would have a hunger for the supernatural, that God would fill that hunger, and that it would be in ways that make sense to people in the midst of their normal lives.

Saturday, April 1st

Genesis 18: 16-33

16Then the men got up from their meal and started on toward Sodom. Abraham went with them part of the way.

17"Should I hide my plan from Abraham?" the LORD asked. 18"For Abraham will become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. 19I have singled him out so that he will direct his sons and their families to keep the way of the LORD and do what is right and just. Then I will do for him all that I have promised." 20So the LORD told Abraham, "I have heard that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are extremely evil, and that everything they do is wicked. 21I am going down to see whether or not these reports are true. Then I will know."

22The two other men went on toward Sodom, but the LORD remained with Abraham for a while. 23Abraham approached him and said, "Will you destroy both innocent and guilty alike? 24Suppose you find fifty innocent people there within the city--will you still destroy it, and not spare it for their sakes? 25Surely you wouldn't do such a thing, destroying the innocent with the guilty. Why, you would be treating the innocent and the guilty exactly the same! Surely you wouldn't do that! Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?"

26And the LORD replied, "If I find fifty innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city for their sake."

27Then Abraham spoke again. "Since I have begun, let me go on and speak further to my Lord, even though I am but dust and ashes. 28Suppose there are only forty-five? Will you destroy the city for lack of five?"

And the LORD said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five."

29Then Abraham pressed his request further. "Suppose there are only forty?"

And the LORD replied, "I will not destroy it if there are forty."

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30 "Please don't be angry, my Lord," Abraham pleaded. "Let me speak--suppose only thirty are found?"

And the LORD replied, "I will not destroy it if there are thirty."

31 Then Abraham said, "Since I have dared to speak to the Lord, let me continue--suppose there are only twenty?"

And the LORD said, "Then I will not destroy it for the sake of the twenty."

32 Finally, Abraham said, "Lord, please do not get angry; I will speak but once more! Suppose only ten are found there?"

And the LORD said, "Then, for the sake of the ten, I will not destroy it."

33 The LORD went on his way when he had finished his conversation with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his tent.

Points of Interest:

- 'started on toward Sodom'—having stopped for refreshment with Abram, they now go on with the task that has brought them here. They have some sort of mission to do in Sodom.
- 'Should I hide my plan from Abraham?'—Abraham is meant to be the forefather of a great nation himself, and he's God's partner in bringing about God's goodness and abundance in the world. So, God decides to let Abraham in on what he's doing: it's a good way to train Abraham to see the world through God's eyes, and it includes Abraham even now on what God is doing.
- 'I am going down to see whether or not these reports are true'—God is being patient and deliberate. He's heard complaints about Sodom; but before he takes any action, he wants to get a closer look himself. God did the same thing before scattering the people at Babel.
- 'the LORD remained with Abraham for a while'—the two angels go on to Sodom, but God sticks around with Abraham a little longer. Maybe God senses that Abraham has something he'd like to say, or maybe he's simply enjoying Abraham's company. God sends the angels on ahead and says, 'I'll catch up with you later.'
- 'Will you destroy both innocent and guilty alike?'—God has only told Abraham that's he's come to inspect Sodom more closely. It seems Abraham has a good guess as to what God will find, and he assumes that God's decision will be to destroy the city. Probably because his nephew Lot lives there, he decides to intercede for the city, asking God to show mercy on the city for the sake of even a few righteous people.
- 'Since I have dared to speak to the Lord, let me continue'—Abraham takes the bold step of arguing with God, but God does not seem at all angry with Abraham. Perhaps God tells Abraham his plans in order to give him the chance to make his request. Abraham starts to haggle with God, like negotiating a price in a Middle Eastern market. God proves himself to be the worst haggler in the world, giving Abraham everything he asks for. Could Abraham have gotten God to go even lower, or did Abraham sense that he'd pushed God as far as he would go?

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Abraham decided to walk a little further down the road with God, and because of that he was given the privilege of hearing God's plan, and even of being able to give his own two cents. Consider spending an extra moment with God today, and as you do ask him, 'Is there anything you'd like to tell me?' Then take a moment to listen. Do you feel as if God might have said anything to you?

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- *For our church:* Pray for the prayer life of our church. Ask God to help us to be bold, persistent, and wise in our prayers.
- *For our city:* God responds willingly to Abraham's request for mercy on a city that he cares about. Ask God to show that same mercy to the city of Boston. It's notable to me that Abraham prays for the whole city, not just for his nephew. Follow Abraham's example by praying that God would treat the whole city—and not just the parts you know, like, or care about—with mercy.

Sunday, April 2nd

Genesis 19: 1-14

1That evening the two angels came to the entrance of the city of Sodom, and Lot was sitting there as they arrived. When he saw them, he stood up to meet them. Then he welcomed them and bowed low to the ground. 2"My lords," he said, "come to my home to wash your feet, and be my guests for the night. You may then get up in the morning as early as you like and be on your way again."

"Oh no," they said, "we'll just spend the night out here in the city square."

3But Lot insisted, so at last they went home with him. He set a great feast before them, complete with fresh bread made without yeast. After the meal, 4as they were preparing to retire for the night, all the men of Sodom, young and old, came from all over the city and surrounded the house. 5They shouted to Lot, "Where are the men who came to spend the night with you? Bring them out so we can have sex with them."

6Lot stepped outside to talk to them, shutting the door behind him. 7"Please, my brothers," he begged, "don't do such a wicked thing. 8Look--I have two virgin daughters. Do with them as you wish, but leave these men alone, for they are under my protection."

9"Stand back!" they shouted. "Who do you think you are? We let you settle among us, and now you are trying to tell us what to do! We'll treat you far worse than those other men!" And they lunged at Lot and began breaking down the door. 10But the two angels reached out and pulled Lot in and bolted the door. 11Then they blinded the men of Sodom so they couldn't find the doorway.

12"Do you have any other relatives here in the city?" the angels asked. "Get them out of this place--sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone else. 13For we will destroy the city completely. The stench of the place has reached the LORD, and he has sent us to destroy it."

14So Lot rushed out to tell his daughters' fiances, "Quick, get out of the city! The LORD is going to destroy it." But the young men thought he was only joking.

Points of Interest:

- 'Lot was sitting there as they arrived'—in a walled city, the gate to the city was the easiest place to find out who was coming and going. Merchants would often sit there, waiting for traders to arrive from other places. That may be what Lot is doing. As we recall, Lot is Abraham's nephew, who traveled with him to Canaan. Lot's presence in the city is probably one of Abraham's major motivators to ask God to spare the city.
- 'welcomed them and bowed low to the ground'—Lot treats the angels with both hospitality and respect. Calling them 'my lords' might just be polite respect (like calling someone 'sir'), or it could mean that he recognizes them as having come from God. Lot responds to these strangers exactly like his uncle Abraham did.
- 'we'll just spend the night out here in the city square'—after all, they've come to Sodom to scout things out for God. Of course, anyone with an ounce of hospitality

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wouldn't let them just stay in the city square. This attitude remains in the Middle East today. When some friends and I were traveling in Lebanon, we met some people who, when they found out that we were staying in a hotel, immediately invited us to stay with them instead; it was as if it was a failure on behalf of the whole town if someone did not offer their place to us.

- 'made without yeast'—bread without yeast is quicker to make, because it doesn't have to rise. Lot and his family are putting together the best feast they can on short notice.
- 'surrounded the house'—the whole city besieges the house. Apparently, the rest of the city thinks that Lot is being greedy, keeping these strangers to himself. A violent mob, almost a riot, develops. These people are the most extreme example (perhaps even outdoing Lamech) of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil: they like what they see, and they are willing to do whatever it takes to get it for themselves.
- 'Do with them as you wish, but leave these men alone'—Lot is taking the responsibility of being a host very seriously. On the one hand, it can be seen as quite admirable: he's willing to sacrifice even one of his most valuable assets, the virginity of his daughters, for the sake of these strangers. On the other hand, it shows the same callousness toward his daughters that Abraham displayed toward Sarah in Egypt.
- 'We let you settle among us, and now you are trying to tell us what to do!'—the city turns on Lot. He probably thought of himself as belonging there now. Furthermore, if it weren't for him, they would have all been in captivity in Mesopotamia: it's for Lot's sake that Abraham rescued Sodom before. As soon as he stands against them, though, they abandon him, considering him an upstart foreigner who has no place to speak with them. He calls them his brothers, but they respond that he is nobody.

In this passage, we see the two extremes of responses to a stranger. We've seen before in our walk through Genesis that being a stranger could be a quite vulnerable position: Cain was afraid of being robbed or killed after he was sent out from God's presence; and Abraham suspected that he would be killed and Sarah stolen when he went to Egypt. Being a wandering stranger could be dangerous and insecure. Recently, we've seen a few examples of people responding to that vulnerability by being especially lavish in hospitality: Melchizedek welcoming Abram; and Abraham and Lot hosting the angels. The men of Sodom take the opposite approach, considering these strangers as food for their appetite. They act with especial anger toward Lot, a stranger who doesn't know his place. Because he dares to speak against the men of Sodom, Lot is promised an especially brutal rape, even though he has lived among them for some time.

Perhaps the generous welcome of strangers we see from Melchizedek, Abraham, and Lot is one key aspect of what it means for them to be a source of blessing for the world. Abraham, Lot, and Melchizedek imitate God in their willingness to be kind and generous to people they do not know.

- 'they blinded the men of Sodom so they couldn't find the doorway'—luckily, these strangers are able not only to protect themselves but to protect Lot and his family as well.
- 'we will destroy the city completely'—while God has promised not to destroy the whole earth again until the end of history, apparently he feels that a local cleansing is necessary in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- 'The stench of the place has reached the LORD'—there's been a great deal of debate about what exactly the sin of Sodom is. Some people propose that God destroys Sodom because of the homosexuality of its residents; others contend that it is because

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of their lack of hospitality. For what it's worth, as I read the story, it seems hard to avoid the idea that Moses views both the homosexuality and the lack of hospitality in this story negatively. He seems to treat them both as symptoms of the larger problem the people of Sodom have, that they are completely given over to their own appetites: they think they have the right to do whatever they want whenever they want; they view other people merely as means to the end of indulging their desires; and they are willing to use force to take what they want if it is not freely given.

- 'he has sent us to destroy it'—apparently, Sodom does not reach the limit of ten righteous people which God and Abraham had agreed upon. The city will be destroyed, but Lot—whether because of his relationship with Abraham, his own treatment of the angels, or both—is given a chance to escape. As Abraham suggested, the LORD will not destroy the righteous along with the wicked.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* This story seems to say that how we treat strangers is a significant aspect of our own relationship with God. Their treatment of the angelic strangers goes a long way toward Lot's rescue and toward Sodom's condemnation. As I speculated in one of the comments above, perhaps serving strangers is a big part of what it takes to reflect God's image and to bring his goodness and abundance to the world. The more we show ourselves willing to distribute his goodness and abundance freely, the more God is willing to give us. Look for an opportunity to help a stranger today; consider being willing to go somewhat out of your own way to do it. If you get the chance to do so, spend a moment later reflecting on it: did it make your day better? Worse? What would you need from God for living like that to become a lifestyle?
- *For our church:* When Lot begins to speak against the culture and attitude of Sodom, he experiences a violent backlash. While our church has a great deal of love and affection for Boston, we also feel like God has some ways he would like to see Boston change, to better experience his goodness and abundance. As we speak about the ways we hope Boston will change, we could experience some of the same angry response Lot did, whether that be from people or on a more spiritual level. Pray that we would be supernaturally protected, just like Lot was.
- *For our city:* Lot thought that he belonged in the city of Sodom, but he found out that he was still on the outside. He was viewed with suspicion because of the ways he was new and different. Boston has something of a reputation of a difficult town to truly become a part of. Perhaps because there are so many transplants and short-term residents, the locals can tend to view newcomers with reserve; newcomers, on the other hand, can tend to have a 'hotel' rather than a 'home' attitude toward living in Boston, tending not to invest and not to imagine that they'll be here long. Pray for peace and harmony between locals and newcomers in our city. Pray that newcomers would feel welcome, and that locals would feel valued, understood, and cared for by newcomers.