

ABRAHAM: WALKING & TALKING WITH GOD

Genesis 17:1-18:33

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 10.20.02

Time. “Time flies when you’re having fun”—so goes the saying. Or, as Kermit the Frog puts it, “Time is fun when you’re having flies.” Time. I still recall the words of an elderly, lonely person who remarked, “The years are so short but the days are so long.” Time. It moves so swiftly even when it seems to move so slowly. Time. It is an education for eternity.

In previous lessons, we have noted that from the time God calls Abraham until Isaac is born is roughly twenty-five years. Twenty-five anxious and agonizing years. I have suggested that God is so slow because He is waiting on Abraham to catch-up. Before Sarah can become fertile, Abraham must prove faithful. We have also seen that all through this time of testing, Abraham has been having visits with God—seven visits that encompass the entire drama. This morning, we will take a look at visits five and six.¹ We begin with the first verse of the seventeenth chapter of Genesis.

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old [It has been twenty-four years since the first visit!], the LORD [Yahweh – יהוה] appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am El Shaddai [usually translated “God Almighty” – אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי]; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous” (Gen 17:1-2).

We do not know with certainty what the name “El Shaddai” means. In all likelihood, it is an ancient name for God that became obsolete with the ministry of Moses. Exod 6:3 reads, “And God continued to speak to Moses, saying, ‘I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai (אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי) but by my name Yahweh (יהוה) I

¹This sermon, for the most part, relies upon Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (InterVarsityPress, 2001), 70-83.

did not reveal myself to them.” Here is how I would paraphrase this verse:² God is saying, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in limited form as El Shaddai—the God who makes covenant-promises. But they did not know me in the full sense as conveyed by my name Yahweh—the God who keeps covenant-promises. After all, the nature of the promises are such that they could not have been fulfilled during the lifetime of the patriarchs.” In the Genesis story, El Shaddai challenges Abraham to be loyal and faithful,³ and promises Abraham many descendants. Let’s continue to read.

³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴“*As for me*, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. . . .

⁹God said to Abraham, “*As for you*, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. . . .

¹⁵God said to Abraham, “*As for Sarah* your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” ¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gen 17:3-5, 9-10, 15-17, NRSV—emphasis mine).

Notice carefully the language of verses 4, 9, and 15: “As for me [God] . . . as for you [Abraham] . . . as for Sarah.” This is the language of partnership, with God expressing the responsibilities of each partner. “Sarai” is renamed “Sarah”—both names mean “princess”—and she is explicitly named as a participant in God’s promises. “Abram”—which means “exalted father”—is renamed “Abraham”—which means “father of a multitude.” *Abraham “must now live up to his new name, which focuses not on his personal relationship with God but on his relationship to the nations.”*⁴ His name looks outward and is centered on the lives of others. Abraham, who initially responds to God

²W. Randall Garr, “The Grammar and Interpretation of Exodus 6:3,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 385-408.

³“Walk before me” (cf. Gen 6:9): A corresponding Akkadian phrase indicates that “this expression seems originally to have been a technical term for absolute loyalty to a king” (Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPSTC (Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 123). Terence E. Fretheim, *Genesis*, NIB (Abingdon, 1994), 458, states: “Walking before God does not constitute a condition for giving the covenant . . . walking before God becomes obligatory for relationship *within* the covenant.”

⁴Fretheim, *Genesis*, 459.

by falling on his face in worship, now responds by falling on his face in laughter. He finds God's promise to Sarah of blessing, and of a son, a bit preposterous. After the laughter, Abraham gains control of himself and suggests that God be reasonable about this heir business and that Ishmael be the chosen heir. God does not chide Abraham; He simply says no, and speaks of a new son, to be named Isaac.

The stage is now set for visit six.

¹The 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. ²Abraham 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.

³He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵Let 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."

⁶So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs [about 20 quarts or 22 liters] of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread."

⁷Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸He 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.

¹⁰Then the LORD 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.

¹¹Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

¹³Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁵Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he [the LORD] said, "Yes, you did laugh" (Gen 18:1-15, NIV).

Even though the partnership between God and Abraham—and finally Sarah—has grown considerably in the first five visits, we may not be prepared for the willingness of God to show up, unannounced and in disguise—and silent. What will Abraham and Sarah do to accommodate their unknown guests? This time, for the first time, both Abraham and Sarah are visited. And for the first time Abraham is greeting God instead of God greeting Abraham—though, of course, God has taken the initiative in making this visit. So it

comes to pass that Abraham and Sarah entertain God. After dinner, Sarah hears for herself the promise of God for her long-infertile womb. Separated by only a tent flap, God speaks so as to be heard by Sarah. Sarah laughs. But nothing bad happens to Sarah for her laughing, although God does make the point that He knows she did so. How incredible! *God, Abraham, and Sarah—it is more than a partnership; it is a friendship.* Abraham and Sarah both laugh at God’s proposals, even in His presence, without negative repercussions. And the happiest of endings, for their child will be called “Laughter.”

There is, however, another purpose to God’s visit: He wants to talk something over with Abraham.

¹⁶When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. ¹⁷Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? ¹⁸Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

²⁰Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”

²²The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

²⁶The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

²⁷Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?”

“If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”

²⁹Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?”

He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”

³⁰Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?”

He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

³¹Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?”

He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”

³²Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

³³When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home (Gen 18:16-33, NIV).

God has promised blessing to all the tribes on earth and now He intends to destroy two of them—but not without cause and not without consulting His partner Abraham. In most of your Bibles, the last part of verse 22 reads, “but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.” Some translations have a footnote indicating that “another ancient tradition” reads, “but the LORD remained standing before Abraham.”⁵ This latter reading is probably the original reading but was changed because it seemed inappropriate to have God placing Himself at Abraham’s disposal.⁶ I take the original reading to be “but the LORD remained standing before Abraham.” God is, in fact, waiting on Abraham. He has confided in His partner and now He is waiting to see what His partner will do. “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Abraham asks. Astonishing! If God were an autocratic bully, or merely interested in throwing a bit of His weight around, surely this would be the occasion. After all, Abraham—along with his wife—has already laughed at proposals of God. But God accepts Abraham’s impassioned concern on behalf of other peoples. “Far be it from You to do such a thing!” adds Abraham. God respectfully listens. God listens patiently to the tedious spelling-out of Abraham’s concern. If there are fifty righteous in Sodom, asks Abraham, will You destroy the city? The bartering goes on to the end of the chapter until Abraham finally settles on the number ten. If there are ten righteous in Sodom, implores Abraham, will You—God—destroy the city? *Who does Abraham think he is talking to? By now the writer has made it clear that Abraham knows to whom he is speaking.* And the truth is that God encourages such boldness, on behalf of others, from His human partner. With all of Abraham’s haggling, albeit on behalf of mercy, God not only listens, but agrees! The partners have been face to face and now they see eye to eye. Abraham is learning to see more and more like God sees. In fact, he is challenging God to see things as he, Abraham, sees them. Until now

⁵Somewhat of a compromise between the alternatives is “but the LORD remained with Abraham” (TEV, NLT).

⁶See Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1979), 18-19.

Abraham has spoken with God three times (Gen 15:2, 8; 17:17). On each occasion his personal welfare has been the sole subject of the discussion. Now a change takes place. Abraham is growing as God's partner. Now Abraham shows concern for the welfare of others, total strangers. He shows himself to be a moral man, a compassionate person. He initiates conversation with God and pleads for the lives of depraved pagans.

And yet, even after the intimacy of this sixth visit, Abraham does very poorly as God's partner in the everyday world. For the second time, he risks his wife's chastity, passing her off as his sister to Abimelech. Then, just before the climactic seventh visit, Abraham has to relinquish Ishmael, his son by Hagar. Abraham seems to be learning, God seems to be pleased, and the partnership seems to be growing. But we can't be sure about any of it—nor can God, apparently—not until the plot's last episode, the seventh visit—the summons to sacrifice Isaac. This seventh visit will be the subject of our study next week.

I know of few stories in scripture than can rival visit six for its portrayal of a *personal* God. As with Adam and Eve, God is walking and talking with Abraham. And like Adam and Eve, Abraham is stumbling and speaking. Abraham's walk with God, at times, resembles more of a stumbling through life. The walk of life and the roads of Michigan have one thing in common: it is extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, to miss all of the potholes. But we should try to avoid hitting the same potholes again and again.

If I were so inclined, and I am not, I could stand before you each week and chew you out for all the potholes you have hit during the past week. I am sure that all of us, including myself, have stumbled somewhere this past week in our walk with God. However, I would rather encourage all of us, including myself, to learn from the mistakes of last week, and—by God's grace—to see the road of life just a little bit better. My question today is not, How bad did we do last week? My question today is, How good will we do in the coming week? As long as we walk with God, He will lift us out of the potholes of life and give us the sight and strength to go on. If we choose to walk without God, well . . . that's like driving a car blindfolded. Will you, will I, choose to walk with God?