

LESSON 5 ABRAHAM AND SARAH

GENESIS 17:15-22 God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I 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.” Then 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?” And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous, he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, who Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

A quote from Thomas Cahill:

Once again, the god promises Abram the land of Canaan and progeny beyond all telling, even royal progeny. . . . And now the god wants to covenant with Abram, just as chieftains covenant with one another. In this covenant, Abram is to have a new name, Abraham, (or Father-of-many-nations) as is Sarai, who will henceforth be Sarah, (or Princess). Abram and his god are to establish an unbreakable bond, which in this period was always contracted in blood, usually the blood of animal sacrifice. But the blood of this covenant is to be Abram’s own and that of “every male among you.”

The man who is now Abraham, still on his face, begins to laugh, thinking, “To a hundred-year-old man shall there be (children) born? O shall ninety –year-old Sarah give birth? Then aloud, “If only Ishmael might live in your presence”—in other words, let the promise fall to Ishmael, who has the great virtue of already existing. Abraham is only trying to help God out, get him to be more realistic. But though God will make Ishmael bear fruit “exceedingly, exceedingly,” his covenant shall be with the child “whom Sarah will bear you at this set-time, another year hence.” So Sarah the pawn, who’s never gotten anything she wants out

of life, is to become pregnant in three months. At last, something tangible.

GENESIS 17:23 Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God has said to him.

GENESIS 18: 1-8 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

From Thomas Cahill:

"When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up, from beside Abraham." Interview over, circumcisions begin. And barely has Abraham finished circumcising himself and "all his household" when visitors arrive. Abraham, no doubt a little winded from his activity, is "sitting in the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day" –just as we see Bedouin chieftains in the punishing sun of today's Middle East, sitting under their tent flap, hoping to catch a breeze.

Abraham, however well established in his herds and retainers, thinks himself well below the mark of these "lords", whoever they may be, and is eager to demonstrate to them his surpassing hospitality.

What he has in mind is considerably more than a "bit of bread."

Running to Sarah and shouting, "make haste!" he commands her to make three cakes from their finest semolina. Then he is off to the oxen

to choose a calf, "tender and fine" for the servant to prepare. When the meal is ready, Abraham himself serves it with solicitude.

GENESIS 18:9-15 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance, behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

From Thomas Cahill:

While the potentates eat, they ask after his wife, whose name they somehow know.

"Where is your wife?"

"Here in the tent," replies Abraham with mounting suspicion.

The lord in the middle of the three says, "I will return, yes, return to you when the time revives (that is, a year from now), and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Abraham knows now that he is entertaining God and two angels, but Sarah, who knows nothing of the previous promises (why would a man share such things with a wife?), has overheard. Perhaps she is giddy from all her frantic baking but she finds the conversation ludicrous and chuckles to herself, "After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure for me? And my lord is old!"

"Now why does Sarah laugh?" asks the figure in the middle, who now reveals himself as the God for whom no feat is impossible, and repeats the promise. Poor, Sarah, full of fear and confusion, insists she did not laugh. "No" says God, "indeed you laughed." Sarah, who has been left out of the great relationship between her husband and God, laughs the laugh of the ancient world, of Sumer, Egypt, and Canaan, of Europe, Asia, Australia and the Americas, the rightly cynical laugh of those that a

woman cannot bear children past menopause and a man cannot get it up in advanced old age. For all the tales of heroes and kings, the world of human experience is as predictable as the zodiac that turns in the heavens.

GENESIS 21:1-7 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

From Thomas Cahill:

God had made her laugh before—by suggesting the impossible. Now Sarah the pawn is given the only thing she ever wanted, the very thing she knew she could not have. She wanted this child much more than Abraham did—however keen his desire had been—for he could have children by other women. It is one of the hallmarks of the handiwork of Abraham's God that his purpose for one human being spills over into the lives of others, creating bliss even for the story's supernumeraries. The conversation between these two (who have barely conversed before, at least in our presence) is rich and poignant, and the speech of her who has hardly spoken has a pathos such as we would expect only from a great writer of dialogue.

God has made me laugh,
All who hear of it will laugh for me.
Who would have declared to Abraham,
Sarah will nurse sons?
Well, I have borne him a son in his old age.

God has made Abraham laugh,
God has made Sarah laugh.
God makes Isaac laugh.