

ARPC Advent Miraculous births 28th November 2021

Sarah and Isaac: The birth of a nation

Abram and Sarai's Story Genesis Ch 12:1-7; 15:1-6; 18:1-15

Recently there has been a re-emergence of TV game shows that I grew up with. Family Fortunes and Blankety-Blank come to mind. Each of these work on the principle of associations on a theme. As you think of Christmas what associations do you make? Presents, Cards, Santa Claus, Letter, Nativity plays or the birth of Jesus! Our association in ARPC's Advent series for 2021 is miracle births and over the next four weeks we are going to remind ourselves of the stories of significant and miraculous births in the bible.

Today we go back to the middle bronze age and 2092 BC to a family whose father was Terah, who lived in Ur a city in S Mesopotamia (Iraq) and who moved to Haran, a city on a tributary of the Euphrates, in modern Turkey close to the Syrian border. Terah's son was Abram who had married Sarai (his half-sister) and sadly she had no children. (Gen 11:30) The bible uses the term "barren" not to be hurtful but to impress upon us the impossibility of Sarai ever having children. Sarai we are told early in the story, is very beautiful, so beautiful that she is on two occasions noticed by other men, important men, a Pharaoh of Egypt and the King of Gerar a region in Canaan.

Abram heard God speak while in Mesopotamia (v1) (Acts 7) and after his father's death he makes the journey God told him to make in obedience. The command is to go to Canaan, to leave behind your past, including your father's family. A decisive decision as they were settled and successful there, a journey of faith based on the promises of God he had been given.

Abram is promised two great blessings by God, **land** and **becoming a great nation** Ch 12:1/2; neither of which looked very promising. They were rich and had a good life in Haran but in Canaan they had nothing; indeed, the Canaanites were there, (v6) highlighted to emphasise that this wasn't some uninhabited land, but one already populated. It is worth noting Abram's age 75! (v4) and we know that Abram's wife Sarai was nine years younger, so she was just past the age of retirement. So, their journey is one of faith, based not on the reality of possibility but solely on the promises of God. The promises from God to them were of impossible and incredible blessings, of land and a people!

To bless is to make happy, to benefit, to bestow favour, blessing is grace. It is mentioned four times in the promise, so we not to miss God's intention is to bless. It is God's work; God says, "*I will make*", and "*I will bless*". The blessings were tangible, the land was real it could be planted, it would have boundaries, and the descendant's well they too were real, men and women, boys and girls and ultimately the blessing was promised to spill out into other nations.

So, Abram and Sarai are promised that God will bless them with a family who will become a nation though they are old and unable to have children and they will be given a land to live in though it is presently inhabited by a formidable nation. It is not surprising that as you read the story, and as time moved on, they are now 99 and 90 years old, that they both struggled to believe and on numerous occasions they find themselves laughing with disbelief. Abram (17:17) Sarai (18:12)

All Abram can see is that without children everything will go to an adopted son Eliezer of Damascus. (15:2) They try to fix the problem on their own by allowing Abram to sleep with a younger slave girl called Hagar with whom a son is conceived called Ishmael.

It would be easy to forget that Abram and Sarai's childlessness is a significant hurt, a serious problem in that culture and a very real challenge to their faith, as it remains for many couples today. I want to acknowledge that and encourage faith in God. His question to God, "*what can you give me since I remain childless?*", and "*you have given me no children*" is very real cry of anguish and doubt! God does not criticise or rebuke, He encourages faith in him and his promise by restating it (v4), "*This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir*" and he takes him outside to view the stars, promising his descendants will be as numerous as they are. With hindsight we can see that the delay was not a denial from God, however living the reality of this requires faith, not in what is seen but what is unseen. Faith is not based on what is not there, but on the word of God, God's truth, and his promises

Abram and Sarai, a very old childless married couple are promised by God, land and a child who would become a nation that would bless the entire world. Their journey from Ur to Haran to Canaan, (Israel) was remarkable, they doubted God and made serious errors and laughed at the outrageous promises which were humanly impossible.

Thankfully, despite everything, *Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.* (15v6) Abram was counted righteous, by believing the word of God. It wasn't earned and it wasn't deserved, in was all of God's grace.

Isaac (21:1-7)

So, the moment of the birth arrives, and the focus shifts to mum, Sarah. *God was gracious to Sarah...the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.* (v1) Sarah successfully delivered Isaac their "miracle baby". Unable to have children all her life, her husband extremely old, there was no natural way this child could have been born and the timing of the birth is totally under God's control.

They called him Isaac, which means "he laughs" as Sarah points out this is because as new parents at this impossible age, they are full of joy. They are incredulous and

satisfied at the miraculous provision of the grace of God and laughter fills their hearts and that of the community surrounding them. (v6-7)

The birth of a nation

Isaac marries Rebecca and they have twin boys Jacob and Esau, and Jacob has twelve sons, and they go to Egypt and become a nation in times of famine, and they return to occupy the land and the books of the OT tell the story of the birth of the nation of Israel God people. The promise came true, as their history reminds us, God always honours his promises as he did for Abraham and fulfilled through Isaac, *“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all nations on earth will be blessed through you.”* 12:2-3

A nation of faith

The first gospel, the gospel written by Matthew, traces the genealogy of *Abraham and Isaac to Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.* The nation spoken of were the Jews, but the nation promised comes from the Jews and specifically through Jesus Christ. This is a nation of faith.

The Apostle Paul encourages the church in Galatia to *“Consider Abraham: He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.” Galatians Ch 3:6-7*

The prophets gave us clues to this for example Isaiah in Ch 54:1 after he has spoken of the suffering saviour in Ch 53 says, *“Sing, O barren women, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour, because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband,” says the Lord.* How is that possible, v5 *For your Maker is your husband-the Lord Almighty is his name, the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.*

The promise for all the earth is fulfilled by faith in God as our Father and in Jesus Christ as our redeemer. What began with Abraham and Sarah was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and in his sons and daughters born by faith in every nation of the world. Romans Ch 4:16 *Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring-not only to those of the law but to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the Father of us all. As it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as if they were.”*

This first Sunday in Advent as we remember the miracle baby Isaac, born to aging parents Abraham and Sarah we see the beginning of the nation of faith that is the church of Jesus Christ. We are proof of his faithfulness to his promise to Abraham and Sarah, we are the nation of faith. Like Abraham and Sarah, we didn’t deserve it, we are and were sinners, we didn’t earn it our faith is a gift from God, and we marvel

at his grace and rejoice in him with joy, because he has made us into a nation of people, with God as our Father and his only son Jesus Christ our redeemer and his promise of land will come when we rule with him in a new heaven and a new earth.

Implications

The journey begins and is continued by faith in the word of God. Advent proves to us the truth of God's word and the power of God to fulfil his word. For nothing is impossible for God.

The brilliant blessing of God through promise still stands. We are a people; a family of nations called the church, and we will be given a land so fantastic there are no words to fully describe it.

The call of faith remains, a call to believe in Jesus the word of God and journey with him through death to heaven. As Abraham and Sarah journeyed with God so we journey with the same hope in the promises of God. *"In my father's house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may be where I am"*. John 14:2-3. Amen.

Questions:

1. How did Abram and Sarai show they had faith in God and his promise?
2. How did they show they doubted God and his promise?
3. Isaiah 54:1-8 "For your maker is your husband" how does this link Abraham and Sarah's story to the church of Jesus Christ?
4. The church is a nation of all peoples: Think about this and its implications?