

Thanks, Lord! I'll Take It From Here
Genesis 21:1-21
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
April 30, 2006
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One day a compulsive gambler was at the racetrack and wagered everything he had, including his home on a 99-1 shot in the seventh race at Belmont Park. He waited very nervously as the horses approached the starting gate. As he waited, he said a small prayer to himself. "God please let this horse win. I promise if you do, I will quit smoking, drinking, cussing, and cheating on my wife, just please let him win". As the horses went behind the gate, the man said his prayer again. "God please let this horse win. I promise I will quit smoking, drinking, cussing, and cheating on my wife. Just please let this horse win".

When the bell rang, the horses were off, and the 99-1 shot was dead last going down the backstretch. The man said once again "PLEASE PLEASE let this horse win. PLEASE, I swear I will quit drinking, cussing, smoking, and cheating on my wife". As they approached the half-mile pole, his horse started making a bold move and was passing horses. The man said once again "PLEASE LET THIS HORSE WIN. I promise to quit cussing, smoking, drinking, and cheating on my wife".

As they approached the 1/4 pole, his horse made a huge move and was now laying third behind the two leaders with what looked to be plenty of horse left for the drive. The man shouted once again "God PLEASE let this horse win!! I swear to you if he does, I will quit smoking, drinking, cussing, and cheating on my wife. Just PLEASE let him win!"

As they approached the final furlong, this 99-1 had taken the lead easily and opened up three links on the rest of the field. You can imagine how hysterical this man was as he was jumping up and down watching his horse about to win at 99-1. He yelled at the top of his voice, "OK God THANKS, I'll take it from here... COME ON YOU OLD GLUE STICK! LET'S WIN ME SOME MONEY!!"

Have you ever found yourself doing that? OK, maybe not down at the racetrack...but have you found yourself asking God to do something HUGE, and then when it looks like it's about to occur, you think, "Well, sure, I could see this coming all along..."

Let's put it a different way: have you ever wondered about the connection between God's promises and human history? Have you ever thought about the relationship between God's actions and my responsibility?

Genesis 21 helps us to explore those questions a bit. Ever since we met Abraham and his wife, Sarah, we have been hearing about this promise from God. For 25 years, we've been hearing about how Abraham is going to be the father of a great nation...about this son that God is going to give to Abraham and Sarah...and here, finally, in chapter 21 it happens. And when it does, it's almost understated – described in just a few verses without much fanfare...except...

Except look at verse 1: "The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised." Did you catch that? It's a muted refrain that we find over and over again in Scripture: The Lord SAID and the Lord DID. In fact, if we go to the first page of the bible, what do we see? "The Lord said, 'Let there be light' and..." THERE WAS LIGHT. At the very beginning of Genesis, the Lord SAYS and the Lord DOES. There is an unbreakable connection between God's Word and God's Action. If we skip ahead to the Gospel of John, in fact, we discover that when God decides to enter the human story fully as a man, how does he do so? John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." When God appears, it's as a Word. The Word." And when we go to the last page of the Bible, Revelation 22, Jesus says,

“Behold, I am coming soon.” The story of scripture is the unbreakable bond between what God says and what God does, and it’s all contained in a few verses here in Genesis 21.

Now that’s not to say that there is no human role or responsibility. After all, we’re talking about the birth of a baby here, and you know that implies some human participation in the process. There is a real element of creaturely faithfulness that continues through the opening sequence here. They name the baby as God had ordained. They circumcise him and they laugh – and their community laughs with them. There is joy in response to that which God has given. Verse 8 tells us that there’s a huge feast when the baby is about 3 years old. Everybody is happy.

And then we see the two words that change the direction of this story. Verse 9: “But Sarah...” For the better part of three decades, Sarah has been waiting for the promise to come true, hoping, trusting...and when the kid is out of diapers, she looks up and says, “Thanks, Lord! I’ll take it from here!”

What happens? She looks out the window and she sees Isaac and Ishmael laughing. You might remember that Ishmael is Abram’s son by Sarah’s servant girl Hagar. About seventeen years earlier, Sarah had gotten tired of waiting for the promise to come true, and so she instructed Abraham to have a child with her slave, thinking that this would bring God’s blessing. Surprise! It did not. And now that she has received the child of the promise, now that Isaac is here, Ishmael is unnecessary. In fact, Ishmael is a threat.

Think on that for a few moments...Over and over again, the Lord has said, “I’ll bless you, I’ll bless the world through Isaac. And yet on this day, Sarah says, “I’m not sure I trust you, God. I don’t want that other boy to get a cut of the inheritance. Not one dime.” And she casts this child out – a child who was born as a result of a process that Sarah herself had set in motion.

What’s next? Look again for the relationship between God’s word and human response. Abraham hears what Sarah has done and said and he laments and God speaks: God says, “Relax, Abe, I’ll handle this. You send them on their way and I’ll take care of them.” And so what does Abraham do? He fills up the backpacks and sends them out, exactly as God had said.

A few days later, the pack is empty, Hagar weeps, and God speaks: “Don’t be afraid. I’ve got my eye on this one. You take care of him, and so will I.” And Hagar responds to God’s word by being faithful: she goes to the well, she nourishes her son, and we even hear that she takes the steps necessary for him to become a great nation by procuring a wife for him. Hagar does what God has commanded and in so doing creates a scenario wherein the Word of God can be proven true.

So where are you in the story this morning? Are you the one who is tempted to say, “Thanks, Lord, I’ve got it...”? Or are you able to listen for what God is saying and then act on it?

Ahhh. To listen for what God is saying. That’s why you’re here, right? I mean, that’s why we come to church – to hear God’s word, right?

Listen: if you are counting on the time we spend in worship every week as the only means by which you’ll be able to hear God’s word, you are really mistaken. This is not enough. The rest of your life is so loud, so pressing, so demanding...that if all you do to listen for God’s word is show up here once a week and try to sing along, you’re going to miss out on some real gold.

Can you do the daily scripture readings that are listed in the bulletin? What about a Sunday School class or a small group? Have you ever gotten an idea of what the Scripture is saying and then checked that idea with a few friends? What are the songs you listen to every day? There are all kinds of ways to fill your thoughts with God’s word...are you doing some of them?

Not only are we to put ourselves in a place where we can hear God's word, we need to go ahead and act on what we know is true. One of the things that the story of Abraham teaches us is that God doesn't give us the whole plan ahead of time. God speaks, and Abraham acts. This morning, we saw Abraham respond to God's action by doing what he knew was right: he circumcised the child. Abraham and Hagar each heard God's word, and they each responded in faithfulness.

Can you look for places where God's expressed intentions are being lived out and take a part in that? What do I mean by that question? I mean that there are loads of places in our community where your friends are acting on what God has spoken...

This afternoon, for instance, Steve Lignos and Ariel Carver will be joining with tens of thousands of others in Washington DC at a rally to protest the ongoing slaughter of innocent children, women, and men in the Sudan. Next Saturday, Jessica Simcox is offering you a chance to get your hands dirty and give food to hungry people. On Sunday morning, I'll be leading an 8 a.m. service of worship in a homeless shelter. Do you see? It's not as if you have to sit here and meditate and somehow miraculously discern, "Wow, God, what do you want? Show me something, Lord..." The Lord is against the oppression of people based on their race or religion. The Lord wants us to feed the hungry. The Lord wants us to be in community with those who are different than us. We know all of this...and have a chance to get involved with it...but will we? Maybe for you it's as simple as following the prayer team out of this doorway at the end of the service today and asking God which one of these mission activities are you called to participate in?

The way of faith as it's described in the Bible is not some huge mystery. It's ordinary bumbling people doing their best to find out what God is saying and to get in on what God is doing. God speaks, God reveals his intent, and faithful people try to act on that. Even though at the beginning of this message I used the phrase, "Thanks, Lord! I'll take it from here" in a sense that sounded selfish and prideful, when it's all said and done, that's exactly what we are supposed to say every week. That's why I keep saying the same thing in the benediction – to remind us that God is moving in the world and we can keep up with him and it's not rocket science. We hear God's voice and we say, "Ok, Got it! Thanks, Lord, I'll take it from here" and we go out into the world and we live lives that are marked by humility and service. We encourage those who are beat up and help those who are suffering and honor the people around us. We're not making this up – we're using this as a starting point. Of course, we know God wants this, and so we do it while we are listening for what else is coming.

The good news is that these are ways and places in which God is speaking in our world and in our lives. Can we live in these places? Let's take it from there, shall we? Amen.