

Inconceivable

Genesis 18:1-1-15

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 21) 2019

Kyle Childress

Once upon a time the world was good, beautiful, and in harmony. God's creation was cared for and people loved and respected one another. They loved God, loved each other, and loved all the earth. Animals and humans and plants worked and lived together in peace.

Then something happened. Call it Sin. Call it rebellion. Call it power. Call it control. Call it malice, envy, mistrust, or whatever. Whatever it was and how it happened is another story. For now, just know that something happened that threw everything out of kilter. No more cooperation and care, now only competition and exploitation. No more love and trust, now only fear and mistrust. Violence and war followed human failing after human failing. As a result almost the entire human race was destroyed and the whole world came this close to being destroyed by climate catastrophe. Yet God said that here was a chance for humanity to learn again, to start over. Instead, humanity decided to try to exploit creation and control each other even more. They said, "Let's make a name for ourselves" (Gen. 11:4) and they built great towers trying to outdo each other in vanity and power. As a result, no one understood one another anymore. They no longer listened to each other and they no longer talked to one another. They spoke by yelling or refused to listen at all. And everyone found themselves on their own, scattered, dispersed, with no sense of community, and no sense of connection with anyone else. Everyone was alienated. Chaos, confusion, estrangement, and hostility were the norm. Some said this was the end. For most there was no more hope.

Then God intruded. Intervened. Not with thunderclaps, not with blinding light, not with earthquakes. No armies marching across the land, neither mighty emperors nor powerful kings. Simply – God spoke... God spoke to Abraham (Gen. 12:1). That’s all. Nothing more. God intervened to turn human history around from its headlong rush to destruction and death by speaking to one lone man – Abram, or as he became known, Abraham. Maybe it was in the middle of the night and the man couldn’t sleep. Perhaps he was restless, got up and walked around, stared at the night sky. Maybe he had a heaviness of heart that went on for days, weeks, perhaps months. I don’t know. Whatever it was somehow or another this lone man knew God, the Lord, was speaking to him and God was calling him, to upend his life and somehow or another God was going to change the world through him. Somehow, inconceivably, God was bringing hope to a desperate world.

God said, “Leave your home, leave your family, leave every security that you have and go to a land that I will show. I’m going to bless you and create a new people out of you who will be a blessing to the world” (Gen. 12:1-2). “I’m going to start over and I’m starting over with you and your wife Sarah.”

We moderns are so accustomed to packing up and leaving, moving to another city and another job that we don’t think twice about this. In fact, we think it’s strange if a person does not leave his or her home place in search of an education or jobs or careers. But in Abraham and Sarah’s time, this meant giving up all security, giving up everything that gave identity, all in order to find a different kind of security and identity – based upon God and God alone.

Inconceivably, based upon nothing more than this word from God, this promise, Abraham and Sarah pack up and go. We are told, “So Abram went, as the

Lord told him” (Gen. 12:4). They went and went and went – for years and years, for decades, wandering, following, trusting, and listening to God. Because Abraham and Sarah were just people, flawed like everyone else, they did some stupid things along the way. Read Genesis 12 up to chapter 18, where we are today, and you’ll be scratching your head, and sometimes wanting to slap Abraham’s head saying, “Don’t do that!” Nevertheless, God had called them and they trusted God. Nevertheless, God had chosen them and in spite of their flaws, God led them so that one day they would become the parents of a new people.

Which brings us to chapter 18 of Genesis, our text for the day. By this time, Abraham and Sarah are getting up in years. They didn’t start out back in chapter 12 as youngsters; they were of an advanced age then. But now decades have past and they’re getting old and getting tired. Their bones creak and pop in the morning when they get up, they groan and moan more than they used to, and the bed feels good at night when they fall into it, even though Abraham has to get up several times during the night.

Genesis says, “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre” (18:1). It was hot and sunny, the cicadas were buzzing, and Abraham was sitting in the shade outside of his tent after lunch, probably dozing. Sarah is inside the tent picking up and cleaning up after the noon meal. It doesn’t take long; it’s just the two of them. After all of these years, still no children. God made a promise and they have trusted God but whatever else has happened there are no children. Sarah is cleaning up after the two of them. The servants and retainers are in other tents. In this one, right now, it’s just Abraham and Sarah and Abraham sits outside hoping for a bit of breeze and dozes off. Suddenly, some leaves stir, something causes him to look up and standing there were three men he had never seen before.

Abraham follows the elaborate hospitality of the culture and jumps up providing for them water for washing and refreshing themselves and then arranges a lavish feast for these mysterious guests. Instead of having his servants wait on them, he serves them and then attends them by patiently waiting while they eat.

The meal is concluding and Abraham waits. A stranger speaks, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” (18:9). (How did they know her name? Who are these people?) Abraham answers, “She inside. In the tent.”

Then comes a startling pronouncement: “About this time next year, your wife Sarah shall have a son” (18:10). Standing there before these three visitors (Who are these people?), after all of these years, maybe at first it doesn’t register. Maybe Abraham just stands there in shock. Or maybe as it begins to sink in, his eyes begin to fill with tears. He can’t talk, he can’t think, perhaps all he can do is cry.

Meanwhile, we discover that Sarah has been eavesdropping just inside the tent, and when she hears this news, she bursts out laughing. Talk about inconceivable! Sarah says to herself, “Abraham is a hundred years old and I’m ninety and can’t have children. And these visitors say I’m going to have a son about this time next year! Who are these people? And I’m going to have sexual pleasure at this stage of my life?” (18:11-12).

Up to now the text has referred to three men, visitors, but here in v. 13, it shifts to saying, “*The Lord* said to Abraham...” Who are these people? Well, somehow they are God. The Eastern Orthodox Church has a long tradition that this was the Old Testament Trinity. (Hence, Rublev’s great icon.)

Or maybe they're angels. With this Old Testament story in mind Hebrews 13:2 says "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unaware."

Angels or messengers from God, or the Lord God's self, says, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I'm old?'" (God cleaned up and skipped over some of Sarah's language.)

Then the visitor says one of the great questions in the entire Bible. "Is anything too wonderful for God?" (18:14). "Is anything impossible for God? Is anything too hard for God?"

This is the question that is the center of this entire story and it is the question that each and every one of us has to face one time or another in our lives. How we answer it determines everything else.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann says there are two kinds of ways of looking at the future: *futurum* and *adventus*. *Futurum* is the future for which present causes are a sufficient explanation.

I remember a story from years ago where reporter asked a major league baseball player how his future looked. The player responded, "The future is like the present, only longer." That's *futurum* in Moltmann's words. The future is based upon all we know of the present, in one form or another. It might be good or bad but it is based upon facts that we can gather and analyze today, and all we can conceive of today.

But Moltmann says there is another way of looking at the future. He calls it “adventus” which means that the future is coming from outside of time and outside of our understanding. It is beyond the facts of today (see Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, p. 25-26; and Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing*, p. 11).

Sarah laughs because at age 90 she sees the future as futurum. Futurum said they were too old. Futurum said the world was in too bad of shape for anything but cataclysm and catastrophe. Futurum said there was no hope. Sarah laughs at the absurdity of this promise from God. It is inconceivable that she would have a child at her and Abraham’s age.

It’s all inconceivable except for one thing and only one thing. God. God is the game-changer.

With God as part of the equation all bets are off and everything changes. It might be difficult or not. It might be dramatic or it might be mundane and humble. But one thing is sure: with God all that we think of as inconceivable suddenly becomes conceivable. By the very definition of the word, God comes from beyond our ability to conceive.

For Abraham and Sarah, their whole life has been inconceivable. They could not conceive a child and they could not conceive of a different future. Their whole life has been adventus. Everything has been because of the God who came to them from outside of their life, outside of their world, outside of their understanding and analysis.

Walter Brueggemann asks whether or not we have a closed future or open future? A closed future is *futurum*, the present only longer. But an open future is *adventus*, where God intervenes and not only changes the rules of the game but changes the game.

Is anything impossible for God? If you answer “Yes.” Yes, some things are impossible for God, then you have a closed future in front of you. The future might not look good but we are resigned to doing the best we can.

If, on the other hand, you answer “No” to the question is anything impossible for God, then we have to give up control and trust God. We throw ourselves into God’s hands and hold on because we don’t know what will happen and how it will happen and we don’t know what our role will be in it all. All we know is that God is at work and therefore, there is hope.

Our story ends with the mysterious visitors saying, “I will return in due season and Sarah will have a son.” Sure enough, a year later Sarah had a son and named him... Lelin. Sorry, named him Isaac. (I get our Sarah and Lelin mixed up with the biblical Sarah and Isaac. But then again, it’s all inconceivable!)

The story of God’s saving of the world has begun. It’s a long story reaching its climax some 2,000 years later in a small, backwater town called Bethlehem and a little later outside of Jerusalem on a cross and then an empty tomb.

And it continues. Even, perhaps especially in the face of a dire future. Once again, the future looks closed with the facts pointing to climate catastrophe, wars, violence, hatred, and fear. Anything else is inconceivable.

Except nothing is impossible for God.

God spoke to Abraham. God still speaks. Perhaps God is speaking to you...
Perhaps God is speaking to Austin Heights Baptist Church.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.