

Believe in God Who Performs Miracles

Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent

Sermon Text: Genesis 18:1-2 & 9-15



<sup>1</sup> And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth... <sup>9</sup> They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." <sup>10</sup> The Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." <sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

Before Christmas, we hear two birth stories that go against all human experience and against all biological knowledge. The first story is the story of the angel who said to the old priest, Zechariah, that he and his wife would have a child, although it was humanly impossible that Zechariah could have a child with his very old wife. As the same angel appeared later to Mary to tell her about the birth of

Jesus, even though she hadn't lain with a man, she believed the angel and said: "May it be to me as you have said." In the first story, it's about a priest who daily prayed and yet didn't believe God at a crucial moment. In the second story, it's about the young girl, Mary. She believed God even when the story appeared utterly unbelievable.

Today we hear a similar birth story from the Old Testament that puts our faith to the test. It's the birth story of Isaac, whose parents were the very old couple, Sarah and Abraham. Just like the births mentioned above, the announcement of Isaac's birth is biologically impossible because Sarah and Abraham were too old. When we follow the story of Abraham and Sarah, one can understand very well why Sarah became a little irritated after a certain time. Because before Abraham was called by God to leave the city of Ur, they were both very rich and had a good life in the cosmopolitan city of Ur. Abraham and Sarah were also rich. But God called them both out of this city and sent them abroad. All with the promise that they would have many children. Life abroad was certainly not easy for Sarah and Abraham. Often, it was even dangerous. Furthermore, they had to roam about like nomads. They did this for many years. And still the two had no children as God had promised. When Sarah's period stopped and the old couple weren't even interested in love anymore, it was clear that the story of the birth of many children must be wrong. I can imagine a little bitterness spreading too. Perhaps Sarah could have said to Abraham: "What a laughingstock you are. We had a good life in Ur. And then you let us be pulled away with all our possessions. And why? Because your God promised you children? And where then are these children? Where then is your so-called God?" It all came to a climax on a hot Israeli summer day. Because Abraham received important visitors. They were God's representatives! Therefore angels! Sarah only saw all the happenings from afar. Here the angels appeared very human, she didn't even recognize them as angels. But she was curious and that's why she understood that God's 3 messengers had once again begun to talk about the birth of a child. Sara was polite. And yet this story of the birth of a child was too much for her now. She thought the messengers were tricksters and frauds. And that's why she quietly laughed about it in secret: "How stupid men can be. What do they know? Nothing at all? They know nothing about the periods of women nor do they know anything about the birth of a child!" And then she was startled. Then the men came directly to her and asked her about her laughter. Sarah was frightened. Because she couldn't understand how the men had heard her secret laughter. And then these men said something to challenge her heart:

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

From the story of Abraham and Sarah as well as the story of the birth of Jesus, we are shown that God transcends the laws of nature. And if we believe in God then we also believe that this God can even change these same laws of nature that He made.

Many years have passed since Abraham and Sarah. Since that time, Jesus came into the world; He died for us on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day. Every Sunday we confess these things in the creed: We confess that God created the world.... We confess that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin Mary... And we confess that Jesus rose again from the dead on the third day. These things which are in our creed contradict all experience. We can't prove them. And that's why faith in God is as difficult as it was for Sarah to believe that she would have a child in her old age. It may be unimportant to us whether Sarah would have a child or not. And yet it is very important. It is very important because God's promises are at stake. Behind the question of whether or not Sarah would have a child is the much more important question of whether God exists or not. And if this God exists it is important to

know whether He keeps His promises or not. The angel gets right to the point with this question: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" If God exists, then He can do anything. If God created the world, then He can also break any other laws of nature. Then it is simple for Him to give Sarah a child. God can do anything. Can you imagine God performing miracles? Can you imagine God making the impossible possible? Can you also imagine that God personally knows you and not only can direct your life but will direct it. This question is important because behind this question is whether we believe in God or not. There is more behind the birth of the child, Isaac, than just a miraculous birth. Behind it is the question if God is there, and if He is there, if He intervenes in human history or not. God had promised Abraham that his entire mission would depend on his children. So if Abraham never had children, it would mean that Abraham also couldn't fulfill his mission. Then he would have left his home for nothing. Then God would be an illusion. As Abraham and Sarah grew old, everything appeared to speak against a God who fulfills His promises. This story repeats itself over and over again in the Bible. People can't believe that God is still there even when you can't see His works. As Jesus finally came into the world, no one could imagine that God would save the world through this Jesus. Jesus wasn't rich nor did He have earthly power. And He didn't look at all like a Savior of the world. As He himself died on the cross, it seemed clear that He had failed His mission. Instead of saving the world, He needed saving Himself. And yet God worked exactly where we could least imagine. God repeatedly allows His servants to live without proof. Abraham and Sarah had to wander aimlessly for years and grow old before God fulfilled His promise. Likewise, we also wander in a strange land for years and grow old without seeing God. And God allows it. That is a big challenge for us. Sarah and Abraham had nothing to consider as proof. As Sarah's period stopped, it was obvious by all human understanding that God must have lied. Also when the angels visited Abraham, they left nothing behind except for one word: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Likewise, all the prophets of the Old Testament had nothing except for God's promise. God's promises are always a contradiction to human experience. That's the case today too. Human experience is that we grow older, later we become sick, and at some point we must die. Some earlier than others. The last law of nature that is spoken about us is at the funeral: dust to dust... ashes to ashes... But that is only the one side. The other side is God's Word. God's promise is over us. And God promises that His love for us can never stop. His love can and will break through our death and create new life. We can't believe any of this by ourselves. That's why God sent us Jesus Christ. We are waiting for Him. Come, Lord! Come soon, Lord! Amen.