

Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)
Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)*

Gary Carter, was a baseball catcher whose 21-year career was spent primarily with the Montreal Expos and New York Mets. He was a Christian who had on his locker a sign that read, "With God, all things are possible." That is a comforting thought. We find the same thought in our Old Testament lesson this morning. In our reading from Genesis, we read, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord." The Revised Standard and King James Versions translate that sentence, "Is anything too hard for the Lord." Does it mean that it makes every desirable thing possible? If not, what kind of comfort is it?

That phrase is Biblical. "Is anything too hard for the Lord" is one we find throughout Scripture. When the Israelites were in exile, it was questioned if God was able to raise them from death to newness, from barrenness to hope. When the angel announced to Mary that she was pregnant, she objected saying she was a virgin. The angel declared, "For nothing will be impossible with God." When Jesus declared that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples questioned Jesus as to how anyone can enter the kingdom. He declared, "For God all things are possible." When Jesus informed the disciples if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could say to a mountain, 'move from here to there,' it would. Then he added, "Nothing will be impossible for you." Therefore, Gary Carter had a Biblical foundation for the sign on his locker.

Isn't that fantastic. With God, nothing is impossible. Think of what we can accomplish if nothing is impossible. There have been, and continue to be, pastors who proclaim that message. Norman Vincent Peale was the pastor of Marble Collegiate Church, in New York City for 52 years. During his tenure, the membership grew from

600 to over 5,000, and he became one of New York City's most famous preachers. He authored the best-selling book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. His teaching was that, with positive thinking, one can do anything. Another pastor who was a well-known and popular purveyor of similar thinking was the Rev. Robert Schuller, pastor of the Chrystal Cathedral, in Garden Grove, California. He too was able to grow his church to an immense size. He represented a further development of many of Peale's ideas. Their teaching that with faith anything is possible is a very attractive message and pulls in many people. Their message at least implies—if it does not directly states—that faith makes every desirable thing possible. On the surface, it seems to continue Jesus' message that "nothing will be impossible for you."

Uh-not really! Faith does not make every desirable thing possible. As Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar, points out, "What is possible is characterized only as everything promised by God. That is, only what corresponds to God's good purpose is possible." You may remember that on the night Jesus was arrested to be crucified, he had been in the Garden of Gethsemane. There he prayed, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." Jesus did not want to proceed with the crucifixion. Jesus recognized that for God nothing is impossible. Here was God's son, knowing what laid ahead, asking God to change things. Would not God honor the request of God's own son? However, Jesus also acknowledged that not every desirable thing is possible: "Not what I want, but what you want." Faith does not make every desirable thing possible. These passages do not permit a casual triumphalism that simply believes everything is possible. Bummer.

As Paul Harvey used to say, now the rest of the story. To declare that with God, nothing is impossible, is still a comforting thought. If it were not true about God, if it were not true that with God, nothing is impossible, then God would not be God. If some things are too hard for God, impossible for God, then God is cannot confessed as God. Then we are a hopeless people. If God is not God, then, as one commentator points out, we live in a closed universe where things are stable, reliable, and hopeless. The world, the universe, our lives, run as predictable, but without hope.

That is our story with Abraham and Sarah this morning. God had promised Abraham and Sarah that God would give them a son, that Abraham and Sarah would have many descendants, a people, a nation, Israel. However, the years dragged on. Sarah continued to be barren. Yes, they practiced what was the fertility treatment of the day. Sarah gave her servant Hagar to Abraham, and Hagar bore them a son, Ishmael. However, God declared that Ishmael was not the Son that God had promised. It would be a biological son to Abraham and Sarah. The years continued to go by. Sarah's biological clock was ticking. As we come to the story, her biological clock was no longer ticking. It was dead. When the author of Hebrews wrote about Abraham in his old age, he wrote that Abraham was "as good as dead." The apostle Paul in Romans states that Sarah's womb was also dead. Harsh words, but true. Abraham and Sarah had become accustomed to their barrenness. They accepted that it was a hopeless situation. there was no hope. People as old as dirt cannot have children. They were resigned to the fact that the future was closed to them. They accepted hopelessness as normal. This is not a story of faith, but a story of unbelief. God's promise is now nonsensical. There was no hope! They are going to be childless.

We come to today's story. Abraham is in his tent and sees three men standing there. These unexpected visitors come with a ridiculous announcement. These three strangers turn out to be the Lord, who renews the promise, "Your wife Sarah shall have a son." Abraham and Sarah were reminded, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" God is God. God goes beyond the stable, the reliable, the predictable, and in doing so, provides hope, is the basis for our hope. Because God is God, we do have hope.

It is scandalous to believe that God is God! Especially in our rational and scientific world. I love Sarah's response when she overheard the promise renewed, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" It was so preposterous that Sarah laughed. Who could blame her? I can just imagine when she told people that she, a ninety-some old woman was pregnant. It was a hoot. It is a scandal.

To say that with God, nothing is impossible, is a scandal. As Walter Brueggemann declared, "Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception." The promise is beyond our expectation and beyond all evidence. That is exactly why we have hope. Our world, as Christians, does not fit into the normal scheme of life. God's world is not a predictable world, a reasonable world. Preposterous things happen. We have hope because God is free to be God. There is no power that can limit this God.

Thanks be to God
through Jesus Christ our Lord.