

## HOW GOD USED THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL TO PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE COMING OF JESUS

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

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*"Your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." Genesis 17:5-7*

Tony Campolo, a professor at Eastern College, cites a sociological survey given to people over ninety-five years old. Fifty men and women over ninety-five years old were asked, "How would you do things differently if you had it to do over again? Think back over your life, the decisions you made, what you did with your life. How would you do things differently?" Nearly all said, "I would have taken more risks." These people, ninety-five years and older said, "We played it too safe. We should have risked more." What about you? As you look back over your life — no matter what your age — can you remember times when you played it safe when you should have risked more?

When I think of that sociological study, I'm reminded of Abraham and Sarah. They were quintessential risk takers. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I'm going to make a covenant with you." What's a covenant? A covenant is a legal agreement between two parties in which promises are made and responsibilities agreed upon. We talk about the covenant of marriage. When two people get married they enter into a covenant. They make solemn promises to be faithful in plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health as long as they both live. Well, God entered into a covenant with Abraham. It was an *everlasting* covenant, not at all dependent on how well Abraham or Sarah lived. God gave Abraham the responsibility to walk before the Lord and be blameless. In other words, "Abraham, I want you to live your life with the knowledge that I'm watching over you every step of the way." That was Abraham's part of the covenant. Now, for God's part, God promised to

make Abraham and Sarah the ancestors of a multitude of nations. And to start off the fulfillment of the promise God told Abraham that Sarah, his wife, would give birth to a son.

Fred Buechner, in one of his books, imagines the scene. One morning Abraham wakes up, rolls over, and says, "Sarah!" "What, Abe?" "God appeared to me last night! God *spoke* to me! He said we're going to be ancestors of a multitude of nations!" "But, Abe, are you daft? We don't have any children." "Well, that's the interesting part. God told me you're going to have a baby." Now Abraham is 99 years old. He has arthritis. He wears a hearing aid and thick wire rimmed glasses. And Sarah is 91. She's bent over with osteoporosis and has a bad heart. She has to stop two or three times to catch her breath going up the stairs to bed at night. So when she hears that they're going to be parents, Sarah starts laughing. She can't control herself, and her husband can't control *himself* either. He keeps a straight face a few seconds longer than she does, but he ends by cracking up, too. They're laughing at the idea of their baby being born in the geriatric ward. They're laughing because not only has God made such an outrageous promise but also *expects them to believe it*. And they *did* believe. They acted on the promise. Nine months later Isaac was born. And through Abraham and Sarah came, eventually, Jesus - the fulfillment of God's covenant promise. The Savior came into the world because Abraham and Sarah risked all for God.

Too many of us are afraid to take risks. God appears to us at every stage of life and asks us to risk everything for him. Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." In other words, Jesus says, "I want you to risk everything for me."

Now there are *good* risks and *bad* risks. A lot of risk is bad. Drinking and driving is a bad risk. Driving too fast on wet roads is a bad risk. Sexual promiscuity with AIDS on the loose

is a *real* bad risk. Diving into a swimming hole without checking out what's below is a bad risk. There are all kinds of bad risks we can do without.

But there are *good* risks. I think of soldiers, <sup>Firefighters,</sup> risking life and limb to save their buddies. I think of a conscientious objector who spoke years ago at Kay's graduation from Messiah College. He was a member of an historic peace church. He was not willing to kill, but was willing to die for his country. He applied for alternative service during World War 2. They placed him on the roof of a London warehouse with a shovel and hose during the Nazi fire bombings. He stood on the roof, dodging firebombs, shoveling them off and putting out fires. So there are bad risks to be avoided and good risks to be chosen. But so many of us are afraid to take any *good* risks for Jesus and the sake of the Gospel.

Taking a risk for Jesus is like dating. Dating is a risk. You run the risk of rejection. I shared with you once how I really liked a girl who sat next to me in one of my college classes. I never asked her out because I was afraid she'd turn me down. But being the romantic person I am I wrote her a poem and sent it to her through the college post-office. I wrote, "A cloud can hide the moon and cover up its face; so I have worn a cloud, to hide from you loves trace. Clouds are just the things to wear, when fear makes beauty hard to bear." I hung around the college post office to see what she'd do when she got it. She opened the mailbox. She found the poem. She read it. She loved it. She swooned. She held it to her breast. She showed it to her friends. They loved it. But I didn't sign my name. I was afraid to risk rejection. She's still wondering who wrote that poem. Dating can be risky. Christians are afraid of risking for the sake of Jesus. We're afraid of rejection. Even saying hello to someone you don't know very well after church can be risky. But God wants us to take risks for Jesus' sake. Start with little risks, like saying hello to a stranger after church, and then work your way up to become the next Mother Theresa.

I'm thrilled whenever I hear of younger members of our church taking good risks. I think of all the young people in our church that tried out for the play, *Bye, Bye, Birdie*. It's risky to try out for a part. You might not get the part. <sup>^ sound system</sup> But so many of our kids took the risk, paid the price of learning their scripts, and submitted to the discipline of practice. I take my hat off to them. They did a great job. That play wouldn't have come off if people weren't willing to take risks. Nothing of importance happens without taking risks.

I'm thrilled when I hear that members of Oxford Presbyterian Church are taking good risks for Jesus. I think, most recently, of Melissa Claypoole on a work mission. I think of Jessica Hammond, <sup>Lorraine Holten</sup> Robin Roten, Anne Terry, Jim Sumner and others going at various times as counselors to the *Great Escape*. I think of Dorothea Murray, traipsing all over the world in some relatively high risk areas. I think of members who have demonstrated for civil and human rights because of their faith in Christ. I think of members of our church who risk running for a public office. I was really proud of my son Andrew recently. He belongs to a fraternity at Temple. He invited his fraternity brothers to chapel services at the Temple campus of Messiah College and then got them to talk with the chaplain for several hours about Christ and the meaning of life. That's risky.

Risk for Jesus! Say hello to someone you don't know well after church. Write a letter to a member you haven't seen for a while. Risk making up with someone you've had a falling out with. Give a tenth of your next paycheck to your favorite charity. Risk telling someone you really love them. Use a week's vacation to go on a work mission. Risk inviting someone to a the Lenten luncheon. Above all, risk committing your life to Jesus Christ. Risk following him. It's easy to say we believe. Lot's of people claim they're born again. But it's really risky to follow Jesus every day. But it's worth the risk. Jesus calls us to take good risks for him. And so many people come to the end of their lives and say, "If I had to do it over again I'd have taken more risks."