



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Sixth Sunday After Trinity July 15th, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

(Genesis 18:1-15) In chapter seventeen of the book of Genesis, Abraham responds to the word of God with full obedience, imposing upon his body and all the male members of his household the mark of circumcision. As a result, we read in chapter eighteen of a self-disclosure of God that included a physical visitation. *The Lord*, we are told, *appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre*. Three men actually appeared to the patriarch. One of them is mentioned earlier in Genesis 16 as the messenger of Yahweh, who was none other than the second person of the Trinity. This is not incarnation. The Word did not become flesh and dwell among us. This was a temporary appearance of the Word intended to confirm the immanent pregnancy of Sarah, and announce the doom of Sodom.

It is unclear whether Abraham knew who these visitors were. The practice of hospitality was common courtesy. What we know for sure is that recognition grew as the conversation developed. Abraham came to realize that he was entertaining angels. Indeed, it is clear from verse 23 that he came to realize that one of them was God in flesh.

God had a special word for Abraham. It wasn't a new word. He had heard it before. Much of what we hear in the preached word is nothing new. It reminds us of what we are prone to forget, or need God to emphasize again. Well, this was the word God had for Abraham, *I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.*

All four men could hear Sarah's chuckle but God wasn't kidding. What was needed was a little reflection. "Ponder anew," said the hymnist, "What the Almighty can do!" On the other hand, the history of Israel was marked by almost continual unbelief. It started here.

What we want to discuss this morning are the causes of unbelief, especially among the people of God. And let's remind ourselves that we are not addressing the problem of atheism or agnosticism. What we are discussing is the unbelief of the Church--the unbelief of those who claim to know the living God.

Let's begin with Sarah herself. It seems to me her unbelief was the result of discouragement. One of the most devastating things in the Christian life is discouragement. Take the problem of unanswered prayer. There is probably nothing that causes discouragement like this. Remember Sarah is in her nineties. When we pray about something and all we get is silence we can easily conclude we are not being heard. It may be that God doesn't even care.

Unbelief can arise as a result of a trial. It can arise in the form of cynicism. We see this in the book of Job. You may recall how Satan was given permission to attack him, so that he became utterly destitute. At first, he professed strong faith in God but then questions arose. His friends came with their accusations. Job tried to defend himself against them. He was soon casting doubt on the goodness of God itself.

Sometimes the Christian will question God because of some terrible loss. "How could God allow that? Why didn't He prevent it?" As one famous agnostic argued concerning suffering and evil, either God is good but not almighty, or He is almighty but not good; either way, He's not the God presented in the Bible.

Unbelief also grows as a result of sin. Sin kills faith! It saps its life. When a believer falls into a cycle of sin he often stops praying or reading his Bible; he becomes increasingly more neglectful of the means

of grace; he finds it painful to hear convicting sermons; he wants to avoid dealing with issues which makes him feel uncomfortable. The more he neglects his soul the more faith shrinks, and doubts and unbelief arise.

Another major source of unbelief is bad teaching. When modern theology argues that the Scriptures are not inspired but rather inspiring, the Scriptures are supplanted and a combination of human reason and experience become the new arbiters of truth and error.

Here is the problem, instead of accepting God's word and the revelation He has given of Himself we substitute our own ideas. I am always impressed by the indictment of Psalm 50:21. God is speaking through the Psalmist and says, *You thought that I was like yourself*. There's the problem. As one famous play-write put it, God made us in His image and so we returned the compliment."

Unbelief also arises from the neglect of Scripture. This is the problem of not knowing what God says, or else imagining He says things He does not say. Sometimes this leads to false expectations, which when unrealized leads to unbelief.

What could be too difficult for the creator of the rolling spheres? Yet, in verse 14 the question had to be posed. Sarah had allowed herself to think in such limited terms she had to be asked the question, *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* She had lost sight of the sheer limitlessness of her God and sovereign. This can happen to the Christian Church and the result is spiritual declension. Prayers become cold and formal; there is no energy, no power, no assurance. God's people waver in unbelief, and the result is the Spirit is quenched.

Those are some of the causes of unbelief. What are the cures? Another way of asking this is, how can we increase our faith? We only have time for a few pointers. The first thing is this, we take hold of unbelief and throttle it by turning to the Word of God itself. The Bible says *Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God*. You might be spiritually depressed this morning. I tell you, you will not get out of it by the exercise of will-power. Faith will grow as a result of hearing and confronting the message of this book. Read it, study it, listen carefully to its exposition. If you are in earnest, my dear friend, God will meet with you.

Then second, unbelief is conquered when Christian people consider what God has done in the past. This is true for each of us in particular. Those of you who

know your Bibles well will know how the Psalmists continually encouraged their contemporaries to remember the past! Faith is built by recalling the deeds of God, and recollecting and reliving them.

Let me mention this further thing; unbelief cannot survive in an atmosphere of praise. Give glory to God, my friends. Instead of focusing on the weakness of his body, instead of staggering at the promise, Abraham looked to God and looked at God! That is the secret of faith! When Abraham considered God's nature, what and who God is, when he reflected on God's names and God's works his faith was strengthened.

There is one final thing. What Abraham and Sarah needed was communion with the messenger of Yahweh. He was the one who was revealed here amid the trees of Mamre. As I said earlier, Abraham did not recognize who he was at first, but there is nothing like the felt presence of Christ for building faith and dispelling unbelief. We need to seek Christ's presence; make time for it; learn to practice the presence of Christ, and call upon Him to draw near to us. Oh, that He might increase our faith. How small is our vision, how puny our prayers. Sarah was forced to lie about her laughter of unbelief. But the one who had come among his people was ready to stretch out his arm to her in mercy and grace, not only to forgive her, but to repeat the promise.

Do we insult God with small expectations of him? We worship and serve a God who speaks to mountains. May he break upon our busy lives and help us to see the sources of unbelief in our own lives. And then, may we also seek the face of God that he might give us a desire, and the perseverance along with it, to resort to those faith-building investments of time and energy in the Word of God and prayer that God may be glorified in our lives.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.