

I

Melissa was a bright, funny, brave 16-year-old girl. She was a typical high school student, active in the youth program in her church, and loved being a big sister to Lauren, three years her junior.

The first time I met Melissa was at the Eggleston Children's Hospital in Atlanta, where she was undergoing treatment for leukemia.

When we arrived in her room, Melissa was doing her homework, trying to keep up with her studies from a hospital bed. The treatment had caused her to lose all of her hair, but she just smiled and made jokes about it.

Melissa needed a bone marrow transplant, a complicated surgery, but one that the doctors felt was her best shot at beating the cancer. And it turned out that her little sister Lauren was a perfect match.

Melissa and Lauren underwent their respective surgeries, and Melissa began to get better. She was released from the hospital, and her hair began to grow back. She was so excited that she finally had grown enough hair to take her senior photos. She was looking forward to returning to school. Her family, her church, and everyone in her world began to rejoice, for it seemed that our prayers for Melissa had been answered. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? we asked.

And then Melissa caught a cold. And because her immune system had

been so depleted, the cold became serious. And Melissa fought valiantly and bravely in the hospital for three weeks. But it was just too much. And at the age of 17, she breathed her last and died.

It was all just so disappointing. We had such high hopes for her. We had every expectation that she would beat the cancer and live a long, full life. Melissa's parents and grandparents and her whole church family had worn holes in the knees of their pants praying for her, asking God to heal her and restore her. Her little sister had literally given her the marrow of her own bones. She had received the best medical care available from one of the top children's hospitals in the world. Everyone around her had done everything they knew how to do. And yet, she died. It was enough to make anyone question the whole idea of faith altogether. It was enough to make the whole exercise seem ridiculous.

II

All of us, I think, have certain expectations about how life is going to go. All of us, I think, try to come to some understanding of God's will for our lives. But perhaps sooner or later, all of us have or will come to a point where suddenly our expectations and ideas about how life was supposed to go don't match up with reality. We've prayed and prayed and prayed. And everyone around us has prayed and prayed and prayed. We've done everything we know how to do, and yet

the results are so terribly disappointing. And when that happens, it's enough to make the whole exercise of faith seem ridiculous, and if it we weren't so sad and disgusted and disappointed, we'd have a good laugh about it.

III

Our text this morning involves just such a story. Last week, we launched off on a broad sweep of the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament, and this week, we're still in Genesis, which literally means "beginning." Last week, we read from a section of Genesis bible scholars call the "prehistory" narratives.

But if there's such thing as a thesis statement for the bible, I think it's in the twelfth chapter of Genesis. In Genesis 12, God calls to a man named Abram and says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will bless you and make your name great. You will be a blessing, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

If there is such thing as a thesis statement for not just Genesis, but for the entire bible, I think it's right there in Genesis 12:4. "In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God's intention, God's mission in the world, God's reason for being, is for the blessing of all the families of the earth. The whole rest of the book of Genesis, the whole rest of the biblical story, right up this very present

moment, is about God's intention of blessing all the families of the earth in and through this one couple.

When we come to our story today, Abram's name has been changed by God to Abraham, which means "the father of many." Except there's one little problem. Expectations have not matched up with reality. The text tells us that Abraham's wife Sarah is unable to have children, which is going to make it impossible for Abraham to live into his namesake as "the father of many," and neither he nor Sarah are getting any younger. In fact, listen for how many times they are described as "old" as we hear a Word from God from Genesis 18:1-15 and 21:1-7.

18:1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who

hastened to prepare it. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. 9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" 13 The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

21:1 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. 2 Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with

me." 7 And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

This was not how Sarah had imagined her life would be. Reality was not meeting her expectations. It wasn't enough that in what should have been their golden years, she and Abraham had picked up stakes and broken ties with family and friends and departed for points unknown.

It wasn't enough her body had never been quite right in the first place, but even so, it had long since ceased to be with her after the manner of women, as the men so delicately put it.

But now here were these three strangers who show up in the heat of the day, when anybody who has any sense beds down in the shade, and there goes her hundred-year-old husband running around the tent like a chicken with his head cut off rolling out the red carpet for these strangers, killing the fatted calf and all. And there she stands at the entrance to the tent, listening to the men go on about how she's going to conceive and bear a child while she's pushing 90. The whole thing was just so ridiculous that she just had to laugh.

And maybe her laughter was to cover up tears of disappointment, tears of bitterness, tears of fatigue. Maybe she laughed because she was ready to just give up on the whole enterprise.

And then came the voice. *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*

IV

Maybe, my sister, you're feeling much like great-grandmother Sarah this morning. Maybe your expectations about how you thought your life would be at this point look nothing at all like your present reality. Maybe you've come to a point this morning where you're stuck, where you're wondering just what exactly is the point of this whole exercise called faith.

And so maybe this question is for you: *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*

Maybe, my brother, you're just feeling tired and worn out. Your hopes and dreams for yourself and for those whom you love have grown old and feeble.

And you come to church and you hear this ridiculous story, about barren nonagenarians having babies and nursing children. And if that weren't silly enough you look at this cross, which tells the story of this itinerant rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth who went around preaching and teaching and causing a lot of trouble for the powers that be, who went and got himself killed, and then some say he was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, and the whole thing just sounds so silly you want to either laugh or cry.

And so maybe this question is for you: *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*

I don't know why your expectations have not matched up with

your reality, anymore than I don't know why Melissa did not live through her cancer. It was certainly not because she lacked faith, or because her family and friends lacked faith. I don't know why Sarah was barren, or why God couldn't just have Abraham a great nation right where he was, instead of having him to pull up stakes and leave his family and friends behind and head for parts unknown. I don't know why so much of our world today seems to be so stuck, so dry, so barren, so bereft of any sign of hope and goodness and life.

But this voice keeps asking this question: *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*

To be honest, it all seems so ridiculous, to the point of eliciting mocking laughter.

But what if the answer to that question is no? What if there really is nothing that is too wonderful for the Lord? What if a 90-year-old woman and her 100-year-old husband *can* welcome new life? What if an innocent man from Nazareth who was tried, convicted, and executed for blasphemy and sedition *can* come back from the dead? What if there really isn't *anything* too wonderful for the Lord?

If the answer to that question is no, there is nothing too wonderful for the Lord, then suffering, pain, and death is not the last thing that will ever be said about my friend Melissa, nor will it be the last thing they ever say about you and me.

If the answer to that question is no, there really is nothing too wonderful for the Lord, then God really is the only one who, when there is no possible way forward, can find a way, even when it seems like all is lost.

If the answer to that question is no, then maybe faith, hope, and love really are the things that will finally endure.¹

V

As we look around us, friends, we see a world that is full of disappointment. We see a world where expectations of how we thought life would be in these United States in 2019 do not match up with reality. And Lord knows that our televisions and social media feeds and water cooler conversations are filled with laughter – not the laughter of joy and peace and hope, but the laughter of mockery and sarcasm and frustration. We see a world that has grown tired of waiting on God, or even given up on the idea of faith altogether.

Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord? If we think the answer to that question is yes, then let's go ahead and wrap this up now.

But the world needs us to keep reminding them of what we know, somewhere deep down inside of us: *nothing* is impossible for God.²

The world needs us to be OK with sounding and looking a little ridiculous about what we say about this Jesus guy.

The world needs us to believe in the unbelievable.

The world needs us to be convinced that though evil may reign for a season, though we may go through seasons of pain and disappointment and despair – there is nothing, neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, that can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Christ Jesus.³

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ 1 Cor. 13:13

² Mark 10:27

³ Romans 8:38-39