

## Two Worlds in Collision

### Genesis 18:1-15

### October 30, 2018

In his book **Rumours** Philip Yancey points out that a society that denies the supernatural usually ends up elevating the natural to supernatural status. We in the West, he tells us, while not rejecting transcendence, have replaced it with impoverished substitutes. He then quotes Annie Dillard who tells of an experiment where entomologists entice male **butterflies** with a painted cardboard replica larger and more enticing than the females of their species. So what happens? The male butterfly mounts the piece of cardboard again and again while “nearby the real, living female butterfly opens and closes her wings in vain.”

Think about all the inventive ways we in the developed world have devised to carve out a satisfying, happy life with only a passing nod to God and the spiritual life and its values. In the new social order our ever expanding expectations and demands for more moves us further and further from the genuine marriage of the physical/spiritual, balance that God intended for the healthy human family. But for many in our Western societies, unfortunately, we seek our happiness, meaning, and purpose in life solely within this material world. And surprise, surprise we seek but rarely find what we’re looking for.

In U2 song, I Still Haven’t Found What I’m looking for, we hear these

**lyrics:** I have climbed the highest mountains

I have run through the fields

Only to be with you

Only to be with you

I have run I have crawled

I have scaled these city walls

These city walls

Only to be with you

But I still haven't found

What I'm looking for

But I still haven't found

What I'm looking for...

I believe in the Kingdom come

Then all the colors will bleed into one

Bleed into one

But yes,...

You broke the bonds

and you loosened chains

carried the cross of my shame, of my shame  
You know I believe it  
But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for  
But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for

How about you this morning? Have you found what you are longing for? Or is there still within you a deep yearning never met? I wonder what that might be? Is it possible that the false gods manufactured in the past century have undue influence on our faith? Do they often cause us no end of grief, disease, unhappiness, and unfaith? And meanwhile nearby, just a hairbreadth away, the real living female butterfly opens and closes her wings in vain. All along perhaps the spiritual in union with the physical were meant to unite us. This is how God created us, with soul and body in harmony.

Abraham peeks out of his tent in the heat of the day. It's siesta in the Bedouin world. There to his surprise stand three visitors. Abraham immediately springs into action as he welcomes them with typical Bedouin hospitality. A meal is hurriedly prepared by Sarah at Abraham's insistence. Like a good eastern host Abraham stands and waits while his visitors eat their fill.

The three engage Abraham in conversation. They know his wife's name and ask where she is. She remains hidden from view as is the custom, but she is in the tent Abraham assures them. We might wonder just who these strange visitors might be. We are given clues.

One of them reiterates the promise the couple have heard several times over the past three decades. It's a promise incidentally that they have all but given up on. Both of them have become hardened to the promise and accept their barrenness as their lot in life. To resolve it they have taken matters into their own hands and followed the Bedouin custom of substituting a slave woman as mother of the child. Ishmael has been born so their barrenness has been resolved by their human customs, not by God's promise of a child. But Sarah, now long past the age of childbearing, remains barren.

Sarah overhears this promise of a child through her body and she laughs. The visitor asks why she laughed. She denies it. But the visitor affirms in no uncertain terms that she did in fact laugh.

Sarah was afraid. Who were these men who knew her name? Who were these men who knew the secrets of her heart? Who were these men who dared touch so carelessly on the pain of her childlessness—who spoke so openly of such intimate matters—who spoke so hopefully about a baby to a woman who had long since abandoned hope? There are different kinds of laughter, aren't there? But there is also the laughter of disbelief—this was Sarah's laughter. She had tried to believe, but her hopes had been dashed so painfully against the reality of her barrenness so many times. She could no longer believe. Her laughter had the cynical edge of a person who had been hurt before and who was not willing to risk being hurt again. But the stranger asked, "Is anything too hard for God?"

What is the key in this exchange between the three visitors and Abraham is the question that is posed to each one of us today: **Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?** Or as translated elsewhere, **is anything too hard for the Lord?** Are miracles possible?

This is a question that is directed at each one of us this morning and at the institution of the church and to communities of faith like us here at West Flamboro. Is there anything in our lives that defies God's intervention? Are there matters or obstacles or situations in our lives that simply cannot be altered because God is too weak or too disinterested or too distant to bother with? It is at this boundary marker that the conflict between the two worlds is felt most keenly.

Some of us here grew up in a society in which all of life was structured around the values of the Christian faith. Many of you will remember when Sunday was truly the Sabbath. Everything was closed. The bells of the church summoned us down our streets, hundreds of us, to the local church. As youngsters we were dressed in our best outfit, made to endure a day without play, without shops, without movies. Sunday school, church, long walks around town with the family, boring adult conversation: this was God day.

Those of you born after 1960 cannot imagine that such a society existed. The society that you grew up after 1960 was one in which institutional religion played little role in the shaping of society's values and lifestyle. Faith has become increasingly a private matter. It has

little or no role to play in matters of state, business, education or law. We still pay lip service to the Christian faith in that religion has a quasi formal role in our courts and elsewhere, but no longer has any teeth to prescribe conduct or policy.

Many of us are immigrants to this brave new world of the post-60's revolution. Many more of us are immigrants to the rapidly changing world of the post-90's world. It is a world in which the divide between faith and practice has grown increasingly wider. Many of us in the church think that the good old days of the 1950's will return; they never will..

Abraham and Sarah had decided that it was much simpler to work their barrenness out by their own ingenuity. They had chosen to resolve the barrenness by their own arrangement. The promise of a child had been a nice idea but it hadn't happened. They were both too old. The world of experience told them that all of the limitations of their physical bodies made this promise out of reach. We might say that they are not so different from us.

Are there areas of barrenness in our lives? How do you and I deal with these? Whether we are immigrants or natives of this new world order, we face the human dilemma of how to discover meaning, purpose and morality in the midst of our barrenness. We may swim in a different fish tank from Abraham and Sarah, but we face the same temptation to remain within the world we see, measure, touch and smell. We are by nature grounded in the earth.

Faith is ever a scandal. The promise is beyond reason; it is not conventional wisdom. To embrace this promise, like the promise of eternal life to each one of us, is to be faced with the unexpected, the unexplainable. We stubbornly remain in our barrenness. We are resigned to live within our closed future. This is normal for us.

In this episode we read today Abraham and Sarah do not embrace the promise. But in some sense they can never live again in a pre-promise world. God will be in their future, regardless. Ultimately nothing is too hard for God, not even the stubborn resistance of this ancient couple. Their resistance to the promise, like ours, will not alter God's intention. This visitor, we are told, was the Lord. The other two

were angels. A son would be born to his barren wife. God will not wait for Abraham and Sarah. They may not believe, but it will be done.

Will God be in our future, in West Flamboro's future? Or shall we take the path promoted by our society? Are we to resign ourselves to our barrenness? Or is God still in the business of miracles. Sarah sits in the tent frightened by the possibility of the promise; she laughed! How about you today? Is the Gospel of grace, which speaks to us from outside our experience and concrete evidence, a word you can embrace by faith? Are you willing now to bow and receive it? Or do we, like her, laugh?

**Amen**