

June 18, 2017
Father's Day
Genesis 18:1-15
God's Plan? You Just Gotta Laugh!
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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. 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. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, so 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." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 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.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 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. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham (through the guests), "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 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." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

The Words of God for the People of God. Let us pray – let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in you your sight, Oh Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer,, Amen.

Sometimes good news seems too good to be true – especially when we have been wishing for something with all our hearts for a long time. The calendar shows that a new year is beginning, and we say, "Maybe this year." The New Year unfolds, and our hope is unmet, and again in the next New Year we say, "Maybe this will be the year." The unmet hope might be for a lot of things: a better job or position, a better relationship with a partner or a child, the return of our health or the health of a loved one – or maybe even that your favorite baseball team might win the pennant.

But few things go as deep as the aching hope of a childless couple for a child of their own. As the years pass and the ticking of the biological clock grows louder, such hope can become a painful burden.

And so it probably was with Abraham and Sarah. They had been promised by God land, descendants, and that they would become a blessing for others. Abraham had staked everything

on his faith in these promises. He had packed up Sarah, their servants and his nephew Lot, and had set forth from their ancestral home. The years had passed with no land and no child. He and Sarah had even tried to rely on the deeply ingrained patriarchy of the time. At Sarah's behest, Abraham had taken Sarah's slave-maid Hagar to bed in order to have children by her. Not a good move! Not only had that given rise to jealousy and strife when Hagar bore Abraham's son, but he was told that the son of a slave would not be his true heir.

Now Abraham extends hospitality to three mysterious travelers, and one of them, asking about Sarah, declares that soon the two of them will become parents.

Sarah, perhaps resting from her meal preparations, is listening in on the conversation behind the partition that divides their tent. The narrator reminds us again that Abraham and Sarah are senior citizens, and that Sarah is far beyond worrying about her menstrual cycle.

No wonder she has a private laugh over this patently absurd statement. She is, however, much more restrained than her husband, for we are told in the previous chapter that Abraham erupted into a side-splitting guffaw when God had told him the same news. As the Genesis writer put it, "Then Abraham fell on his face," the equivalent of "rolling in the aisles."

The bearers of the impossibly good news, however, are no ordinary men. We are told that these visitors come directly from God, so they know of Sarah's private laughter. They question Abraham why she laughed (and in questioning him perhaps God is also challenging *Abraham's* earlier laughter). God, then, confronts them with the faith-stretching question, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

Sarah either comes around from, or calls through, the partition, that she did not laugh. Their visitors are a bit awe inspiring; so perhaps she does not want them to take offense. But the Visitors will not let her off the hook. "Oh yes, you did laugh as if to say, it's all right, God's plans are often worth a giggle.

After all, who of us could blame Sarah? Laughter is often our response to news that seems absurd. In Walt Disney's *Dumbo* the crows laugh and sing a mocking song at the notion that an elephant can fly, an idea about as ridiculous as the promise that a ninety-year-old woman will give birth to a child. So Sarah is not alone in her laughter. But she had to learn that when you're dealing with God and God's promises, the seemingly impossible becomes possible.

Indeed, God and the three angel companions were engaged in a Mission Impossible designed to keep alive the old couple's hope. A couple of chapters later we are told that old Sarah did indeed give birth to a son. And appropriately, they named him "yitsach", "Isaac", which can mean either "laughter" or "wonderful" so that, as Sarah says, "everyone will laugh with me" over this seemingly impossible feat that does, in fact, prove that nothing is too "wonderful" for God. Thus Abraham and Sarah become the pioneers of an absurd faith absurd – that is, until that faith is fulfilled.

Our lection therefore reminds us today that, when confronted with what seems like an impossibly hopeless situation, when we have done all we can, rather than give up, we can remain open and look for signs of God's answer to the impasse.

Because just when there seems to be no way out of an impasse, along comes God—though we might not realize that it is God at work—and things suddenly turn around. A new way is forged. Good Friday miraculously gives way to Easter.

We are slighted terribly and we cry, "I can never forgive him for that!" We look at our current situation and we say, "No way can I live with that!" We find ourselves drifting back into destructive bad habits yet again and we say, we will never be the people we want to be. We hear the news about one more suicide bombing we say, "We will never know peace as a human race!"

From small personal matters to big international concerns, the words "never" and "impossible" cloud our minds. And indeed, it may be that we have in fact done everything we could humanly do to make the situation better or to find a satisfactory solution and there is literally no more that can be done. However, if that is true then, from the perspective of faith, the good news is that our worrying is over. We can safely relax and turn to God with the prayer, "Oh God, I know that your solution is already at work in the world and that you will make it known to me in your time. Make me open to the signposts you send that I might recognize them and follow them faithfully when they come."

You know, there was a time when it was thought that Jim Crow must be accepted because it was the law, that gay and lesbian persons would never be fully accepted in any church, that apartheid could never be destroyed in South Africa without a blood bath, and that an old man and an old woman were foolish, laughable, even to think about becoming the ancestors of the people of God, the people of faith.

We need to open ourselves to vision and dreams that may seem absolutely impossible but are nonetheless God's absurd plan for *us*. Remember at Pentecost, it was the prophet Joel who was quoted by Peter in his sermon, "In those days, says the Lord, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your young shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.

In his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann says that "the prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for the questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined."

In other words, when one is gripped by a powerful vision of what can be, faith predicates first that the vision be shared regardless of how "realistic" the vision first appears.

God did not lay out the details of how Sarah would give birth to a child at her advanced age until she and Abraham first accepted that it was really going to happen. How often in the church and in our own lives do we dwell upon the perceived obstacles that stand in the way of our doing what God wants us to be doing?

The story of Isaac's birth suggests that the most difficult step is not in coming up with a plan of action, but instead, the most difficult step is genuinely believing that something wonderful can and will be achieved in spite of the present situation.

I don't know about you but I was always a fan of Yogi Berra. His quotes were legendary and have become a part of our everyday language – quotes such as, 'It ain't over til it's over,' 'Never answer an anonymous letter,' 'It's dejavu all over again,' 'If the world were perfect, it wouldn't be' or 'if you come to a fork in the road, take it.' But recently I heard another quote of his that I thought was right on the money. It was, 'If I hadn't believed it, I wouldn't have seen it.' 'If I hadn't believed it, I wouldn't have seen it.'

This, in one sense is what faith in God is. Miracles are ready to happen all the time. But if we don't believe it, we just don't see them. Believing is seeing is believing is seeing is believing and so on.

Yet there is also another part of this that seems to me essential but that in some way runs counter to *our* choosing to believe and that is that, in a very real sense, we must be seized by faith. Faith must grab us before we can truly grab it. It often takes being confronted by an experience so profound that we just have to believe. Sarah and Abraham had to be visited one last time by those three mysterious strangers from God, have all their doubts challenged and be reminded in no uncertain terms that the promise of a child was still one God intended to keep.

The great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich once said, "Faith means being grasped by a power, often in a desperate situation, a power that is greater than we are, a power that shakes us and turns us, and transforms and heals us. Surrender to this power is faith." (Paul Tillich, *The New Being*)

And this surrender, as in the story of Sarah and Abraham, can often be rib-tickling. Laughter often is the best response to a desperate situation, paving the way from crucifixion to resurrection. You may not know it, but the holiday of Halloween or All Hallows' Eve has part of its origin in this idea of laughter in the face of death. The Christian part of Halloween is that we are to make fun of death and all of those things that normally scare us with the idea that in Christ, as Paul reminds us in his second letter to the Corinthians:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

Do you come today forlorn believing that there is little hope? Here is the good news: God is the king of the absurd and can make something out of nothing, a vision out of dross, life out of loss and death. And maybe moving on means finding the humor in some or all of it and just laughing out loud. In fact, perhaps finding the humor in it, is in fact to find a part of God's new plan and presence in our lives.

It is interesting that "humor," shares the same Latin root as "humility," and "human" – the word "*humus*", which means literally "ground". Humor, humility, and being truly human all have the same tendency – the tendency to ground us when we begin to think we are capable of doing more

than we really are – that because we can't figure it out and do something, the situation is necessarily hopeless.

To see the humor in life – in the absurdity of continuing to have faith in God in our dead-end situations is cause for laughter. And there is something about that which often loosens things up and gives a new kind of space for things to begin happening

In closing, I want to tell you the story of Barbara. Barbara was 31 and a mother of three children. And she was staring at possible thyroid cancer. One Sunday, as she was praying in the church, that she attended, the gospel story of the woman with a hemorrhage kept coming into her mind “[The woman] wanted to be healed but she didn't want to bother Jesus, so she approached him in a crowd and touched his robe,” Barbara explained. “I found this kind of humorous – as in, ‘I am going to suffer and probably die but I don't want to really trouble God too much with this.’ But, of course, Jesus knew what happened and praised the woman for her faith. I wanted to be like that woman.”

“As Barbara prepared to go up for Communion, she suddenly thought, “Could I be like her?” and she chuckled to herself. The thought seemed foolish but there it was. An Episcopalian, Barbara began considering the priest who was presiding at the Communion Table as a “stand-in” for Jesus during the service. She felt really tickled about it all and she decided she would touch the priest's robe when he gave her the Communion wafer.

“I touched his robe, and he couldn't have known that I did, though he *did* know about my cancer,” she recalls. “But he did something in that moment that I had never seen him do before: He put down the Plate with the Communion wafers and came back over to me; laying both hands on my head, he prayed for my healing.”

“After receiving the Communion wine, Barbara stood up at the rail of the chancel. ‘I was so overwhelmed with God's love that I knew I was healed, and I just started laughing,’ she said. ‘My healing wasn't physical at that point, but my heart was healed. I wasn't anxious or afraid or doubtful or sad at all. I had complete trust in God and God's love, something God knew I needed far more than any other kind of healing at that moment.’

“A few weeks after her healing at the altar rail, Barbara's surgery revealed that the lump on her neck was indeed thyroid cancer. She went through treatments then, and six months later for a recurrence. Somehow the medical treatments, too, seemed to be directly from God:

“I felt that God had simply completed a healing he had started at the altar at church.” Today, Barbara is healthy and leads a full and prayerful life. Her youngest child has graduated from college; the God-given sense of assurance she received years ago as the mother of three young children has been borne out in her life.”

When it comes to God's plan, sometimes, sometimes you just gotta laugh.

Let us pray: Gracious and Most loving God, ground us in your plan – a plan that may be absurd but renews our hope and our trust in you.

And now bless these gifts that they may help proclaim your laughable gospel to an often over-serious world. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.