

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35–10:23

Proper 6A
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A Keeper of Promises

Today's old testament lesson reads a little like the nativity story. We hear the annunciation, the promise- *At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.* And sometime later we hear the fulfilment of the promise- *Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age.* This part of Abraham and Sarah's story shows God as a keeper of promises, turning weeping in to joy, darkness into light, barrenness into fertility. But oh my dears, there is so much more to this story, and much of it, not pretty.

In order to understand today's lesson, to understand Abraham and Sarah's laughter, to understand their less-than-enthusiastic belief in this particular promise, we need to travel back many, many years in their lives. When Abraham, then Abram, was seventy-five years old, God spoke to him saying, *Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* *Genesis 12:1-2* And Abram went, not knowing anything about the place he was going, not knowing how he would get there, not knowing what he would find, even believing that his heretofore childless wife would conceive and bear children. He had to have believed that, because without descendants, none of the other promises mattered. But as the weeks and months and years went on, there were no children.

Remember that Abram was seventy-five and Sarai sixty-five when God called them to a new place and a new life, when God made those initial promises. Many years later – we don't know how many, God spoke again to Abram. *'Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.* *Genesis 13:14-16* So Abram settled on his promised land, near the oaks of Mamre in Hebron. And still, there were no children.

Many more years later – we don't know how many, God spoke again to Abram. This time, God said *Look to the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.* *Genesis 15:6* We're told Abram believed God and that God reckoned him as righteous. Interestingly, we never hear what Sarai thinks. And though Abram believed God, still, there were no children.

Eleven long years after that first promise of a child, Sarai decided she had waited long enough. It was the first hint of unbelief, but it was also the result of years of pain and suffering. Any woman wanting children and unable to conceive goes through unspeakable grief and sadness. And in

first century Palestine, any woman who couldn't bear sons was less than worthless. So Sarai's deeply personal heartache was intensified by the shame in her culture. She had been promised a son after a life of infertility and when it seemed clear to her that the promise wasn't going to come true, it smacked of the deepest, ugliest kind of hurt. So, feeling betrayed by God, Sarai took matters into her own hands, telling Abram to impregnate her slave Hagar. Which he did, and that was the second hint of unbelief. Hagar bore a son, Ishmael, and finally there was a descendant. But it wasn't Sarai's child. Then thirteen more years went by before Abram and Sarai were reminded of God's as yet, unkept promise. And by this time, Abram was 99 and Sarai, 90. They knew they would never have children together, knew Ishmael would be Abram's heir, through whom multitudes would be born. This was their reality, and they were resigned to it. Abram and Sarai had accepted God's call to leave everything they knew, AND they'd accepted God's future for them. But what they could no longer accept was believing in the promise of a child for Sarai. It was too late.

Once again, God stepped into their unbelief, with the same old, unkept promise, saying: *I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.* ...*'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but 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.* *Genesis 17:2-6* Then after a lot of talking about the covenant with Abraham's household, God said: *'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'* *Genesis 17:15-16* Well, that was so ridiculous, all Abraham could do was fall on his face and laugh.

That's how we got to the place today's story begins, when the Lord appeared to Abraham as three strangers. We're not told whether Abraham initially recognized those three as God, but he was exceedingly hospitable to them. Last Sunday we talked about hospitality as a matter of life and death in first century Palestine, a sacred duty for all. But Abraham's hospitality with these strangers is over the top! Bowing down to the ground, running all over the place getting things together, ordering people around and then standing off to the side as the three strangers feasted. Whomever he might have thought they were in the beginning, when Abraham heard that same old unkept promise again, he had to have known they were God. Sarah heard the words of that tired, old promise too. Ha, she laughed! THAT promise again? At 90 and 100 years old? Honey, that ship has sailed.

When questioned, Sarah did what a lot of us do when we're afraid. She told a little lie to protect herself. I didn't laugh, she said. Oh yes, you did laugh, the stranger said. I wonder why Abraham could laugh at God without repercussion, but Sarah could not? Both of their laughter expressed unbelief. Abraham had a son. Sarah did not. After twenty-five years of unkept promises, I would probably laugh too. But I wonder how I would have answered the next question... *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?* Well, is it?

While I love the poetics of the question, the question might be easier to think about if we ask it another way. Is anything impossible for God? The implications of our answer to that question are considerable. If we say “Yes, there are things that are not possible for God” then it really is not God we are talking about. But if we say “No, nothing is impossible for God,” we can find ourselves in a most precarious place. If we believe that God is the God of everything and nothing is impossible for God, that can lead us to some tricky questions. If nothing is impossible for God, why does God allow little children to get sick and die? If nothing is impossible for God, why is there domestic violence? If nothing is impossible for God, why can’t I get pregnant? If nothing is impossible for God, why is there war? If nothing is impossible for God why are there so many hate crimes? If nothing is impossible for God, why did my beloved die? Those are hard and real questions that speak of both the human condition and the character of God.

We know the quick answers. That humans have free will and humans make bad choices. That people die because they live in bodies that wear out or don’t work right. But there is so much more. Our God is not a manipulator. God incarnates rather than manipulates. God incarnated in Jesus, but God incarnates in us too. And what is important about that is that God’s promise never, ever to abandon us means that the Spirit of Jesus, God’s Holy Spirit is always with us, and that the same Spirit lives in us so we can love each other through the hard parts. I don’t believe God wills us to suffer, but we do suffer. And God suffers with us. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked God to take the cup, the suffering and death that were about to happen, away. But God does not ignore or even try to get around the reality of suffering in our lives and in the world. As Jesus, God has suffered everything we can possibly suffer. And God redeems our suffering by turning it into loving compassion. Com – with, passion – suffering.

Sarah and Abraham suffered a great deal before God’s promise was fulfilled in Isaac’s birth. And while their suffering didn’t destroy their faith in God, near the end, all they could do was laugh at the ludicrous promise of an heir. We so often think of Abraham and Sarah as saintly examples of the faithful. But God’s story of salvation is filled with broken, flawed and messy people, people just like Abraham and Sarah, just like us. Eugene Peterson, Presbyterian Minister and author of the contemporary version of the bible, The Message, puts it this way:

...The history in which our Scriptures show that God is involved, is every bit as messy as the history reported by our mass media in which God is rarely mentioned apart from blasphemies. Sex and violence, rape and massacre, brutality and deceit do not seem to be congenial materials for use in developing a story of salvation, but there they are, spread out on the pages of our Scriptures ... There are punishing consequences, of course, but the fact is that all these people, good and bad, faithful and flawed, are worked into the plot of salvation. God, it turns out, does not require good people in order to do good work. As one medieval saying has it, "God draws straight lines with a crooked stick." [God] can and does work with us, whatever the

moral and spiritual condition in which [God] finds us. God, we realize, does some of [God's] best work using the most unlikely people.¹

As it turns out, Abraham and Sarah didn't need to believe God in order for God to do God's salvific work. That's how it is for us too. God is God, we are not, and God knows that even when our best faith isn't nearly good enough, God's faithfulness is more than enough. It isn't the strength of our faith or the constancy of our prayers or the goodness of our behavior that makes salvation possible. God makes salvation possible. *"... for God, all things are possible."* *Matthew 19:26*

Abraham and Sarah named their baby boy Isaac, which of course, means laughter. I wonder if they did that so Isaac would always remind them of their unwillingness to believe in an impossible promise, and of the God who despite a lot of evidence to the contrary, was a keeper of promises. That's something else we'll never know. Amen.

¹ Peterson, Eugene. *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 140-141.