

NL 2 GENESIS 18, 21 ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND ISAAC

I don't know if you've seen those Progressive Insurance commercials where two people are disagreeing about what just happened and one of them throws a challenge flag, like in football, so that the incident will be seen on instant replay? They're rather humorous, and so true to life; because how often do we immediately recollect differently than our spouse or friend about something that just happened? The instant replay proves one of them right and one of them wrong. I think of this in relation to our Scripture lesson today in the verses in which the Lord and Sarah have a differing account of what just happened. The Lord claims that Sarah laughed at God's promise of a son to be born to her; Sarah denies laughing, fearing the Lord's displeasure. God throws the challenge flag; the scene is played back on instant replay, and God gets the final word, saying, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.' Because she did. But can we blame her?

Backing up in our story, this morning we have a most engaging and delightful text with themes of hospitality, surprise, and laughter running throughout. Last Sunday, we were in Paradise, if you recall, in the 2nd chapter of Genesis, with the first couple of creation still on good terms with God, each other, and nature. Unfortunately, quite a lot happened between then and today's text, much of it not good at all. Sin and brokenness enter Paradise, as the first couple disobey God and eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; their innocence is lost, and they are forced out of Paradise into the still good yet also broken created order with which we are familiar. Soon, the first murder occurs when Cain kills Abel; then God in despair at humanity's violent ways destroys everything in a flood, saving only Noah, his family, and two of every animal; finally, the Tower of Babel is built, with humanity trying to reach the heavens, but

being thwarted. All of this is part of that universal, timeless pre-history section of Genesis. But starting with Genesis 12, we enter a particular time and place with the story of Abraham and Sarah. They were a prosperous and successful couple of the ancient world, living in Ur, around 1750 BCE, when God calls Abraham to leave his comfort zone and move to a new and promised land, the land of Canaan. A covenant is created between them. Abraham and Sarah display faith in this One Lord, as opposed to giving allegiance to the many gods of polytheism practiced commonly around them—they obey God’s command to go. The Lord promises that in this new land, they will be the progenitors of a great nation of descendants. They will be blessed to be a blessing to the *entire earth*. This is not a meagerly promise. When we happen upon this couple in Genesis 18, now in Canaan, they have successfully relocated, they have kept the faith, but a problem has arisen---they now growing old and yet have no child, no male heir to carry on this promised nation of descendants. A haunting question lies behind these circumstances.....namely, has God forgotten God’s promise? This is a huge, faith-shaking kind of question, because what kind of God is a God Who doesn’t honor God’s own word and promise?

This brings us to our text this morning. Notice that the Lord appears to Abraham in this text, but incognito, seeming to be 3 men. These three men will later be identified as angels in the New Testament. But all Abraham sees are three strangers. We learn an interesting detail....Abraham is standing at the *entrance of his tent*, he’s on the threshold. Why is that important for us to know? Maybe because we realize he could just as easily have ducked inside, closed the flap, and pretended he never saw the three strangers, as he could have come out to greet them. He had a choice: to ignore these strangers who meant nothing in his life, as far as he knew, or to uphold the ancient Arabic customs of extreme hospitality, which extended even to

strangers. He chose the latter, and it makes quite a difference. Not only does Abraham acknowledge the existence of the three strangers, he is enthusiastic, even exuberant in his hospitality efforts. We read that he *ran* to meet them, bowed low to the ground, respectfully addresses them, and then tells them they'd be doing *him* a great favor if they allow him to bring them a bit of refreshment. Jeez, talk about a welcome! A wonderful connection between ancient Arabic and contemporary Minnesota culture here is in the understatement Abraham practices. He's says he's just going to get them "a little bread"; in the same way that many a Scandinavian Minnesotan might invite someone in for a "little lunch", and then overwhelm them with a several course meal followed by dessert. Abraham prepares these strangers a veritable feast! Not merely bread; he urges Sarah to make cakes, he has a tender calf killed and roasted, and he sets it before the strangers along with curds and milk and bread, then hovers about them while they eat, in case they need a refill on their coffee. The man knows how to throw a spontaneous, robust dinner party, right?

Now things get really interesting, as the strangers engage in conversation, first with Abraham, then with Sarah, who is listening at that tent entrance. They foretell that they will return "in due season" and Sarah will have borne a son. Sarah thinks this a jolly, good joke. She is post-menopausal, Abraham is about 100 years old(whatever that may literally have meant), and she just doesn't think this is at all a likely event. She laughs to herself at the very thought. Which is when the encounter begins that leads to that Progressive replay moment. The Lord wants to know why Sarah laughed and doubted, since, after all, as the angel asks---"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" "I will return", says God through the angel, "and Sarah will have a

son.” “Oh no, I didn’t laugh,” Sarah insists with both fear and feistiness. The challenge flag is thrown, the replay is viewed, and the Lord says, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

This ends the first act. We pick up the second act a few chapters later when, in fact, all happens as the Lord foretold. Sarah conceived and she and Abraham have, at long last, their longed-for son and heir, the progenitor of a great nation of descendants. Abraham names his son Isaac and has him circumcised as the Lord asked. Well and good. But in a marvelous and somewhat unusually intimate Scriptural moment, we learn of Sarah’s internal reaction to this whole, miraculous event. We read, “ Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And further, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” Sarah ends the first act of our text by laughing in *disbelief*. She ends the second act by laughing with *joy*. And in fact, the name Isaac, means “laughter”. This elderly couple names their miracle child “Laughter.” Now there’s a story!

As I said earlier, themes of hospitality, surprise, and laughter run throughout this story. It is, in that sense, a fun story. There are darker stories around and behind and after this story, but this morning, we’re focusing on Abraham, Sarah, and this miraculous birth of Isaac, the Laughter of his parent’s old age. Behind this happy story lie significant theological questions that resound as *loudly for us* as they did for this couple about 3,700 years ago.....that’s how old this story is, which is remarkable in and of itself!

But we meet up with this story every time *we* doubt the faithfulness, the goodness, the reliability of God. Every time we question if God is really there, really cares, really honors

God's promises to us. Every time we ponder our aging and look towards the future with fear and trepidation, we *are* Abraham and Sarah. And how easy it is to find ourselves in any of those questions and doubts and fears!

I trust I'm not the only one who has found the news of this last week to be disturbing, at best? Between horrendous natural disasters around the world, the ridiculously polarized politics of our own nation, the roller coaster of our economy, I can hardly face the reality of the news. It's hard to reconcile so much bad with faith in a good and loving God. It's easy to overlook how God is present, bringing that thread of laughter and joy to us, sometimes against all odds. Abraham and Sarah were promised a homeland and a nation of descendants. They came, over time, to doubt that promise, and so its fulfillment at long last came as a surprise and a delight. It made them laugh. How often does God surprise and delight *us*? And make *us* laugh? Through the antics of a pet or a child or a friend's spontaneity or an unexpected sighting of beauty? And while God promised Abraham and Sarah a homeland and descendants, what has God promised us? Through Baptism and Holy Communion, we are promised God's salvation, forgiveness, mercy, presence, and empowerment. It's not that we legitimately can complain to God because our retirement account is performing poorly; God doesn't promise us material prosperity. But we can keenly feel the absence of God's love in times of duress of any kind, and that *is* promised to us, leading us to legitimate lament and questioning. If we don't *feel* loved, does that mean God's love has failed? Or that we can't recognize it or feel it in that moment? God's timing is often slower than we'd like; certainly it was for Abraham and Sarah. Yet, God's promise is kept. God is proven faithful.

Here's another thing, and I'm not sure if it falls into the good news or bad news department. Abraham and Sarah thought they were too old to be of any use in God's plan for creating a people any longer. Turns out they were wrong. There is not a person here who is not growing a day older every day. Some of us have had more days of growing older than others, but aging is a universal human phenomenon. If that becomes either your happy excuse or your sad reason for thinking God is done with you, this story definitely challenges that perspective. God's callings and purposes for us continue *all* the way through our life's journey, as this story so aptly demonstrates.

This story also enlarges our understanding of God. We all know people who take special delight in surprising others with colorful gifts or funny stories, people who enliven any party or gathering with their sense of humor; that would be God. God shows up incognito in the three strangers to make this long-coming, surprising announcement of a birth. God takes delight in proving Sarah wrong in her laughter of disbelief. God provides laughter for this older couple, both literally and metaphorically, in keeping God's promise. If we have in our minds somehow a stern, joyless, unsmiling Lord, we apparently have not met up with the God of Scripture, the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. The God enfleshed in Jesus, who will use humor and exaggeration in His story telling to make His points. Wouldn't it be such a positive thing for our troubled world if we, as followers of Christ, as children of God, could also contribute some playfulness, humor, and surprise to the world as part of our lives of faith?

Maybe what we really learn from this story is: Don't give up on God. Don't stop believing. God's timing and methods may not be what we expect, but God is faithful; God keeps promises.

And don't give up on yourself, assuming you're too old. Or too young. Or too fragile. Or too cynical. Or too scared. God continues to work through us regardless, and God's plan includes us and encompasses us, regardless.

Go ahead and laugh; in disbelief, in joy fulfilled. Laughter is good medicine and dear to the heart of God. And we have reason for laughter when we claim the faith that God is good and that God honors every promise made. Amen.