

“Connecting Doubt and Hope”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; September 15, 2019

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

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

Standing by the dusty, sunlit entrance to the tent, squinting out at Abraham talking with the three strangers, Sarah knew better than to hope any longer. She had asked Abram to retell the words of God’s promise countless times, until they were etched in her memory. “To your offspring I will give this land.” And again, “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth”. And again, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.” Abram was 75 years old when he first heard God’s promise, and Sarai was only ten years younger. Would she—barren though she was her whole life—have a child at age 65?? That would be most unusual, but perhaps not out of the realm of possibility. So Sarah had begun to hope. Yet the years went by, one after another, and no child was ever conceived. Sarah saw her 70th birthday, then her 75th, 80th, and 85th birthdays. These were busy years, with life-giving travel, blessings galore, and exploring the land that had been promised by God. But there was no child to pass on all her accumulated experience and wisdom. When you’re waiting for something and it never arrives, you try to put it out of mind. Thinking of it and hoping for it only makes the inevitable disappointment worse.

As her 90th birthday drew near, Sarah knew better than to hope any longer. The ship of children had sailed. The well of God’s promises had dried up. So she laughs when the man says to Abraham, “your wife Sarah shall have a son”. Is it a laugh of tender wistfulness at what might have been, or does bitterness catch in her throat? When asked about her laughter, of course she denies it. She didn’t want to be thought

unfaithful to God's promises, but there was no point continually waiting for something that was never here.

What are *you* waiting for? Does it have a definite time of arrival, or is it more uncertain than that? Sometimes we wait for things that have a definite fulfillment date: getting a driver's license, completing school, having a baby, or retiring from a career. These are hard to wait for, but it's easier because you can look at a calendar and see when it's going to happen. Then there are other things we wait for which are not guaranteed, hopes of the heart. We wait to fall in love, or to be held by another. We wait to find truly meaningful work. We wait for arguments to blow over, and for relationships to mend. We wait for healing of a broken heart, for relief from daily pain, for an end to mental illness, or for grief to lose its choking power. We wait for a peaceful death, but even that is not guaranteed.

We wait for transformation in a broader, global sense also. We long for God's promises—given how many centuries ago?—to be fulfilled at last. Millions go to bed hungry, yet Isaiah says that God “will make for all peoples a feast of rich food”. Migrants are forced to choose between the terror of their home countries, deadly deserts, and fierce opposition in a new country. Yet we read that God “shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; ... nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” How long, O Lord? How long until black lives are protected as much as white lives, until officers of the peace can keep their guns holstered forever? How long until schools are fully funded, until everyone has what they need to thrive, until cancer is a distant memory, and sharing by all will mean scarcity for none? How long until the promise of Revelation comes to pass, until God will dwell among all the peoples of the world, and “will wipe every tear from their eyes”?

In the face of such great evidence to the contrary, no wonder it's hard to trust God's promises these days. It may seem cynically laughable to those outside the church that Christians pray daily for “your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”, yet God's realm is so hard to see. If we're honest, sometimes it's really hard to believe inside the church as well.

Nadia Bolz-Weber has been a Lutheran pastor of a Denver church called “House for All Sinners and Saints”. She's written powerfully about her struggles with addiction and mental illness, and her experience leading a church which gathers every type of person together. She describes how agnostics, Jews, addicts and soccer moms all find grace when they gather together in community. I once heard her say that “faith is not given in sufficient quantities to individuals. Faith is given to communities instead, so we may hold it for each other.”¹ One of the main reasons we gather together as Church is to hold the light of hope for one another. When you're on your own there's little protection against inevitable times of despair when waiting has gone on too long and the laughter comes out bitter. But when we are together, some who feel more fully that day the hope of God will nurture and care for others who feel that day the doubts of life. And the next week, or the week after that, roles are reversed. We hold the promises of faith as a community, then by divine grace we see God bringing them about in unexpected ways.

Because by the end of the story, Isaac is born! Laughter (what “Isaac” means) comes to pass! Not only the doubting laughter of Sarah in chapter 18 (or of Abraham in the previous chapter), but the incredulous, disbelieving-but-joyful, grace-abounding laughter of Sarah in chapter 21. “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me. Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” Sarah knows—when her prayers and the promises of God are fulfilled at last—that God has brought laughter.

Isaac is born—laughter is born anew—in church every week. God has brought laughter when one who was in deep grief no longer feels the knife-edge of loss. God has brought laughter when an alcoholic celebrates another anniversary of sobriety during prayer time. God has brought laughter when people share stories of social and community healing. God has brought laughter in the simple delight of sharing a

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Friday Roundtable”, *MPR News* hosted by Kerri Miller, September 18, 2015.

pew with those you love and those you are just starting to know, singing together of the world that God is bringing into being. God has brought laughter, is bringing laughter, and will bring laughter even in the places of greatest sorrow.

Hold to this promise forever—that Isaac is born, that resurrection overcomes crucifixion, and that the Spirit of God still sustains the world. Hold to that hope, hold it for others, and let others hold it for you when you need. Let it be our guide, our promise, and our touchstone of faith, even when the proof is hard to find. Let the God of such durable hope and laughter grant us hearts that trust in God's promises, eyes of faith to see them coming true, and joyful sharing of this Good News for all the world. Amen.

Laughter at the bedside of Jean Olsen



“Trinity” painting by Andrei Rublev, AKA “The Hospitality of Abraham”:

