

Ordinary 11, June 14th 2020: *God challenges the fixed world of people.*

Genesis 18:1-15

A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah

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 favour 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.'

Last week when we read the first chapter of Genesis, I remarked that the first story of creation is not meant to be taken literally, in fact it is far more important than that. But the main point is that God is a creating loving God, who created the world and the human and non human inhabitants. And

that God is a God who keeps right on creating. Think for a moment of how the air became cleaner during lockdown.

The story of Abraham begins in the twelfth chapter of Genesis with a devastating command. *'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.'*

And comes to an end in Chapter 25 where *'Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age'*.

But between the first sentence and the last breath, there are many twists and turns.

In this morning's Genesis reading we are at the entrance of Abraham's tent, by the oaks at Mamre, as he rests in the heat of the day.

At the end of the preceding chapter, a whole chapter in which God had bound Abraham to God in a remarkable act of radical faith; Abraham had been circumcised, along with Ishmael his son by the slave girl Hagar, as well as all his male slaves; so maybe he and the household are convalescing, as one would, had one been circumcised at the age of 99.

And lets not pass too quickly over this circumcision, that comes at the end of a chapter of Abraham and Sarah's arguments of belief and disbelief.

For this ritual developed into baptism for we Christians. Circumcision like baptism, has a dual potential. On the one hand it is the inspiration for a life of faith, the energizing symbol of our faith and all that it represents, on the other, it can be an empty practice, a cultural practice a 'society' baptism perhaps.

And as I continue with this sermon, I invite you to hold these extremes in your mind. To continue to wrestle with them, for we all do.

Anyway, Abraham is resting and suddenly sees three men standing nearby, and he runs to greet them, and he bows down low. He invites the three strangers to wash their feet while he kills a calf and has bread made and stand by the tree to serve them as they eat. It is a very fine display of hospitality and will set him in good stead when later, or shortly in the story, he argues with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah,

But I am getting a little bit ahead of the story here.

As the strangers eat their midday meal, they ask about Sarah. Where is she? Abraham replies that she is there in the tent. And the Lord tells Abraham that she will have a son.

Sarah has the chutzpah to laugh, for she and her husband are old, and well past childbearing. She sees God and confronts God. Was she wrong in laughing? Was she thinking about men and their inability to multi-task let alone multi think? Is that what she laughed at?

(and) Who has the effrontery to laugh at God?

And yet here we have God announcing a birth, just as surely as any angel announced to Mary, the birth of the messiah.

And with this laughing, the world of Sarah and Abraham is decisively changed. Their world of barrenness is shattered by a new possibility that lies outside that which they could normally expect to happen. A possibility way outside their wildest dreams and hopeful imaginings.

And so, Abraham and Sarah are presented here, not as models of faith, but as models of disbelief. For them the powerful promise of God outdistances any ability they might have to hear and believe it.

The message here is what a scandal and what a difficulty faith is. Faith isn't a reasonable act that falls into all the other reasonable acts of our lives. The promise that the Gospel gives us is not a conventional piece of wisdom founded on anything logical. To believe, to accept this story requires us to suspend our usual logic, our usual every day, what we call, intelligence.

By the time the stranger comes by and tells Sarah and Abraham that they are going to have a child, Sarah and Abraham have become used to their barrenness, their infertility. They are resigned to a closed future. They have accepted that hopelessness is normal. They have forgotten or come to disbelieve those words that God spoke in chapter 12. *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.*

They do not hear the promise of God in a mood of open, receptive hopefulness, but in resistant, closed, hopelessness.

And before anything new can come into their lives they have to suspend belief, for truly, the promise on that day is nonsensical.

But we have to return to the central spoken question of the text (vs 14) 'Is anything impossible for the Lord?'

This question is meant to dismiss the protests of the hopeless couple. The dismissal doesn't come as a proposition, or an assertion or a proclamation, but as a question. It comes as a question because the good news needs a decision. And that decision has to come from Abraham and Sarah.

'Is anything impossible for the Lord?' This is the question around which the confrontation revolves. It is an open question that waits for an answer. It is the question that comes up everywhere in the Bible.

We have to say that it is the fundamental question that everyone has to answer at some time in their lives. And how it is answered determines everything else.

If the question is answered, 'yes, some things are too hard even for the God', then God cannot be God. We have not given over freedom to God. We have determined that we will live in a closed, stable, reliable, and hopeless world.

If, on the other hand, the question 'Is anything impossible for God?' is answered with, 'No, nothing is impossible for God' then we have accepted the freedom that trusts God and no other. We cannot answer the question lightly or easily.

The good news of this text, this story, this morning, reaches out beyond our frames of reference. It breaks out of our reason, our wisdom, our morality, and our common sense. It shatters our value systems. There cannot be a greater criticism available about our definitions of reality.

But back to the text. A great deal depends on Sarah and Abraham's answer. But perhaps unthinking, in a curious little dialogue at the end, humorous, but filled with pathos *Sarah denied laughing, saying 'I did not laugh' He said 'No, but you did laugh'.*

And here it is left, unresolved. The laughter of disbelief seems to refuse the invitation implied in the question. Abraham and Sarah's world has been tilted by a possibility, but they have beaten off the attack. The story ends with their world quite intact. Nothing will happen that will change the hopelessness in which they live.

But it appears that not everything depends on their answer. God has decided.

God has decided that there will be a new world and the new world for Abraham and Sarah will be a child, a son and heir. And this new world does not depend on Abraham and Sarah being open to accept it. God keeps God's own counsel and works out the will of God.

It will happen, if not because Abraham and Sarah believe, then because they do not believe.

Today's story ends with Sarah and Abraham still in doubt.

After the meal and presumably rest, the men set off on their journey to Sodom, and so the strangers depart with the question still unanswered. The answer is only given provisionally in Genesis - for in this book we are always waiting to see what God can do, what God might say.

But from the story of Sarah and Abraham we learn that faith is a scandal. The promise of God, of faith, is beyond our expectation and beyond all evidence. The possible impossibility of God deals frighteningly with Sarah, and Abraham's future, and with our future. No wonder Sarah denies laughing.

We too should deny that we laughed, for fear that God will change our lives in the same way, that Sarah and Abraham's and their household and all of God's people's lives, were changed forever.

Genesis explains that the call of God is a promise to us, and this promise weaves in and out of the Genesis stories. While the stories of Genesis are diverse, quite different, they become the community of believer's story, as a whole.

The call of God is transmitted to us through story telling. The stories do not exist for themselves or by themselves. They exist as they are told and valued, transmitted and remembered in a community that is seriously engaged in a life of faith and ministry of faith.

And that is us.

References:

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Biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version of the *Bible*

Ps. There is an Islamic story from Persia about Abraham's confrontation with the three strangers (who turned into one during the story) that goes this way:

Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent when an old man walked by. Abraham rushed out to him and asked "Ancient one, come into my tent, let me bathe your tired feet, rest with us and join our meal". And so, they sat down together to eat. 'Father' said Abraham 'I should think that a man as old as you, and undoubtedly filled with respect for the divine one, who gives us our food, would say a word of thanks, not to me, but to the gracious giver.'

'Not so' said the man, 'I know of no such behaviour. We fire worshippers have no such practice'.

'Fire worshipper' cried Abraham, 'leave at once! You will not eat under my roof!' And he drove the old man out into the night.

Later as he slept, the Lord came to him in a dream. 'Abraham for over eighty years I have borne with that man. Could you have not borne with him for one night?'