

It's a Promise
Genesis 18: 1-17
Third in the sermon series "Faith Journeys"
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First Federated Church
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It was getting toward noon on one of those hot days when if you look out across the sand your eye plays tricks on you. You think that you see shimmering water when it is really only heat and sunlight reflecting off of the ground. Sitting at the door of his tent by the oaks of Mamre, Abraham saw what appeared to be three men approaching. A bit surprised, I suppose, he ran out to meet them.

"Come into the shade of my home. Stop and rest for a while. Let me give you something to eat and drink, then, if you must, you may continue on your journey." The three strangers looked at each other and nodded their approval.

Abraham went into the tent and said to Sarah, his wife, "Quick! Get some flour and make some bread." Leaving the tent, he ran out to his herd and selected one of his finest calves and gave it to a servant to prepare. He then took some curds and milk and the calf to the visitors. He stepped aside while they ate.

After a little bit one of the strangers said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" A bit surprised, I suppose, that they would know that he had a wife named Sarah he told them that she was in the tent.

"I will return about this same time next year and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Now, Sarah was listening in on the conversation, especially when she heard her named mentioned by Abraham. She couldn't help herself when she heard them say that she shall have a son. A son!? After all of these years. At a time of life when she was beyond child-bearing years!

"Why did Sarah laugh," the Stranger said out loud.

"I didn't laugh," she replied.

"Ah, but you did," Abraham said. I tell you, sometimes Abraham's judgment is a bit questionable. He never learned that silence can be golden, at certain times, especially when it comes to correcting your wife!

In any case, what the Stranger said came to pass. Within a year Sarah conceived and gave birth to a child, a child named "Isaac" which means "laughter," a child of a Promise.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews we can read "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". Faith is believing in God's promise even when all the evidence is to the contrary.

It is believing that despite what the world tells us, there will come a day when swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. It is believing that there is life in the valley of dry bones. It is believing that despite what we've experienced in the past there will come a day when all tears shall be wiped away. It is believing that despite conventional wisdom we only find our life after we are willing to give it up.

The most interesting thing about today's lesson, in my opinion, is that God kept His promise no matter what. Twenty-five years before the birth of Isaac, God promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation and that all the peoples of the earth would bless themselves through him. Though Abraham's faith wavered, though Sarah and he decided to take things into their own hands when Sarah gave Abraham her handmaid Hagar, God's promise never wavered.

When conventional wisdom said that Sarah was too old to have a child, lo and behold she became pregnant. The news was too good to keep a straight face. It was too fantastic not to laugh at its impossibility.

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth once talked about faith floating in a sea of doubt. He said that you cannot prove the promises of God. He wrote, you cannot prove the faith. The promises of God are surrounded by the things that contradict them. The Promise of Life in a culture of Death; the promise of Righteousness when we are overwhelmed by sin, the promise of Hope in a sea of Despair. Faith boldly steps forward and says, nevertheless, I will trust every single word. Then reason begins to scream, "The Promises of God are absurd. The Promises of God are silly. The Promises of God are Trivial. The Promises of God are Demonic. The Promises of God are not to be trusted."

"Faith is ready for that," Barth wrote. "It says to Reason, 'O blind and foolish Guide, you understand nothing of the ways of God.'

"And then Faith reaches out and takes Reason by the neck and chokes the Beast."

Homiletics professor Thomas Long tells the story of a congregation that celebrated confirmation each Pentecost. On Pentecost Sunday young people would stand before the congregation and get to show off a bit of what they knew. Sometimes they would respond to questions from the Westminster Shorter Catechism of Faith. Sometimes they would sing a special song. Sometimes they would read their corporate statement of faith. On this particular year, though, they had an opportunity to quote a little Scripture. The confirmation teacher stood before the class and paraphrased the Apostle Paul's question from Romans, chapter 8: "Who shall separate (you) from the love of God in Christ?"

The first student responded, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate *me* from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The teacher went to the next student and asked the same question. "Who shall separate (you) from the love of God in Christ?" Like the student before her, she replied, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate *me* from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And so it went from student to student. But as the teacher progressed down the line, the congregation became a little uneasy because at the end of the line was little Irene. Irene had Down's Syndrome. When the teacher finally came to her, he asked before the class and paraphrased the Apostle Paul's question from Romans, chapter 8: "Who shall separate (you) from the love of God in Christ?"

Irene looked at the teacher and then at the congregation who was holding their collective breath before she said in a clear firm voice, "Nothing."

That's a Promise.

Amen.