

Date: June 12, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 11

SERMON: Laughing at the Impossible

Text(s): Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

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A friend of ours whose elderly father had been having some health problems, took her dad to several doctors, who put him through a variety of tests, and all the doctors returned the same diagnosis. He was suffering from what they called “Advancing Maturity.” Don't you love that? None of us is getting older. We're only advancing in maturity as time goes by. Some of us wish we had more choice in the matter, so that we could sometimes retreat from maturity instead of always advancing. But unfortunately, it doesn't seem to work that way. We have to advance whether we want to or not.

In the strange and wonderful story from the Book of Genesis that is our Old Testament lesson this morning, we meet two people who are very far advanced in maturity. In the chapter prior to this passage, we're told that Abraham was 99 years old and his wife Sarah was 90. That's pretty advanced in maturity, isn't it? Abraham and Sarah's great age is important to keep in mind to get the full impact of this story.

Last week, we looked at the beginning of this saga, picking up the story of Abraham and Sarah as a childless couple in their seventies, living a settled urban life in the northern Mesopotamian city of Haran. One day, Abraham received a rather peremptory summons from God to pack up and leave his home and his extended family and go out to a land that God will show him. This strange and abrupt command was accompanied by an incredible promise that God would make Abraham and Sarah the ancestors of a great nation through which blessing will come to all nations of the earth. And as we saw, Abraham and Sarah sold their house, bought a tent, and became pilgrims, following where God led them, even though they didn't know where that would be.

Today's part of the story takes place some twenty years later. Here they are nearly a century old by this time, sitting companionably in their tent, dozing away in the heat of the midday desert sun. They're still not sure where they're going or how they'll know when they get there, and there are still no signs of how they are going to become the ancestors of a great nation. By now, they have probably almost forgotten that promise that got them excited enough to make them pack up and move out. (Given that they're both nearly a hundred, they've probably forgotten nearly everything.) It's at this point that the narrator, with little introduction or preparation simply says, “*The Lord appeared to Abraham as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.*”

Now before we go on, I'll just mention a rather strange feature of this text which you've no doubt already noticed. The text says the Lord appeared to Abraham, and yet there are three visitors. That has provided commentators for many centuries with lots of fun, but not much success in figuring it out. From a fairly early stage of the Christian era, Christian commentators interpreted this as a sign of the trinitarian nature of God. Needless to say, this interpretation has never been given to the text by Jewish interpreters. So we'll leave the precise identification of the three visitors and the mystery of how they can collectively be referred to as “the Lord,” to scholarly speculation and concentrate on the story itself.

In the traditional protocol of Middle Eastern hospitality, Abraham invites these strangers to make themselves comfortable and then sets the household in motion to prepare a meal for the guests. These divine visitors (or visitor— take your pick) have come with a message, this time not so much addressed to Abraham as it is to Sarah. The Lord inquires after Sarah's whereabouts, and proceeds to deliver a birth announcement nine months before the blessed event. “*I will return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.*” And Sarah, who has been eavesdropping from behind the curtained off area where the women of

the household stay, and where she's been baking bread, has a rather predictable reaction to this announcement. She laughs.

How do you think Sarah's laugh sounded? I imagine it was somewhere between a snort and a giggle. It's not the laughter of joy, but the laughter of disbelief, and who could blame her? What woman who has advanced in maturity to 90 years of age wouldn't laugh at such a preposterous notion? At her age, this is a comic situation. Is she to doubt the evidence of her own body? At this point in the story, Abraham and Sarah are not models of faith so much as they are examples of the tension we all live with—the tension between wanting to believe, wanting to believe things can be different, and at the same time, trying to accommodate ourselves to what our eyes and reason tell us are the facts of the case.

Faith and reason are sometimes complementary, but also at times, seemingly at odds. Faith is a little like romantic love in that respect, and we all know that there's no rhyme nor reason in why two particular people fall in love with one another. Or as Pascal famously put it, "The heart has its reasons which the mind does not know."

Abraham and Sarah have long ago become mentally accustomed to living without the hope of ever having descendants of their own. They've accepted reality, painful as it is, just as we do. Life goes on. Not every cloud has a silver lining, despite our clichés. Not every story has a happy ending. Life sometimes hands us bitter disappointments, disconcerting jolts, and painful memories. But somehow, we make our peace with it and go on. We're realists. Just like Sarah and Abraham were realists. Ninety-some years old (but who's counting?) and full of that resigned, somewhat cynical knowledge borne of long experience that we call wisdom.

But Sarah's disbelieving laughter isn't the final word, the last laugh, if you will, in this

story. Her last laugh will come later. The Lord asks a question that cuts through Sarah's skeptical laughter, "*Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?*" I suspect that the word of God almost always confronts us with a question like that. "Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?" It's the question which crops up again and again throughout the Bible. It's one of the fundamental questions that confront all of us again and again and again. "Is anything too wondrous for God?"

Walter Brueggeman, one of our own UCC biblical scholars, in his commentary on this question says that if we answer "yes" to that question, "yes, there are some things that are too wondrous for God," what we're really saying is that we live in a closed universe of natural cause and effect, where things are always predictable, and ultimately hopeless. There's actually a kind of perverse security in that closed universe model, isn't there? If the world really is predictable and if we really are locked into the same old behavior and the same old animosities and the same old relationships with little chance of a different future, at least our expectations won't be disappointed.

On the other hand, Brueggeman says, if we answer, "No, nothing is too wondrous for the Lord," we open ourselves and the universe up to the possibility of the impossible. C. S. Lewis said that believing that God is free to act in ways contrary to predictable cause-and-effect relationships is like crossing the proverbial Rubicon. Either we go across or we don't. But if we do, if we dare to believe in God's power and freedom, we have to be prepared for anything. The list of possibilities expands enormously.

So how do we begin to cross that river? How do we begin to live in a new world where impossible things become possible, where our lives are open to the surprises of grace? To have faith, to really become open to the future that is full of promise, we have to learn trust. We have to let go of our ordered and predictable world

where all things continue as usual, and the possibility of genuine transformation of ourselves or our situation is remote at best. In short, we have to let go of all the things we cling to in order to insulate ourselves against risk and disappointment and hurt. Only then can we take the step of faith into the river of God's grace where the current of the Spirit carries us along to new places and new possibilities that we cannot even imagine.

I remember one evening getting a phone call from a woman I didn't know in the small town in New Jersey where I was serving. She and her husband were at the police station which was across the street from our church. Her husband had just been arrested on his third drunk-driving charge, and that meant losing his license for twelve years. His wife told the police that she was fed up with this, she didn't want to be married to him any more. As far as she was concerned, the police could keep him. She didn't want him back. She'd had it. She couldn't deal with his drinking problem another minute. The police officer pleaded with them to talk to somebody about this before they took any final action; he wanted her to cool down, and her husband to be fully sober. After much coaxing, he finally got them to agree to talk to a counselor. He told them there was a good counselor across the street from the police station. He was referring to a Catholic priest who had a well-regarded family counseling service in the building next to my church. But when they came out of the police station and looked across the street, it was dark, and they couldn't see the sign for the counseling service; they did see the church, however, and concluded I was the one the police officer was referring to. So they called me. When they told me what the officer had said, I guessed that he really meant to send them to Father Marty, but I also knew that Marty was so much in demand that it would be weeks before they could get in to see him, and since I could hear the desperation in the woman's voice, I

agreed to meet with them that evening.

After some conversation, the only thing I was pretty clear about was that there was very little chance of anything good coming from this. His pattern of going on three or four day drinking binges every three months or so had been going on for twenty years. She'd forgive him, bail him out, but then be resentful and take it out of his hide by shaming him. Their two teenaged children were already so alienated, it was unlikely that they'd ever be anything but a deeply dysfunctional family.

But I could also sense that in the midst of her deep anger and hurt, and in the midst of his deep humiliation and self-disgust, there was a little spark of something. Not hope; they were beyond hope. Not faith. They didn't believe anything new could happen. They'd been through it all so many times before. Maybe it was an almost extinguished spark of the love that had originally brought them together. Maybe it was just that little, tiny bit of room for the impossible that they were keeping in a corner of their battered hearts.

I can't honestly say that I had much room either for hope or the possibilities of grace as I talked to them. I didn't have any confidence that anything could change. But, after all I was a pastor, and I was supposed to represent the power of God, so I screwed my courage to the sticking point, and asked them if they were willing to agree to follow three disciplines or practices, and then meet with me once a week to talk about how they were doing. I asked them to promise that every morning, they'd spend at least an hour praying together about their problems and reading and talking together about some scripture passages that I would give them, and that they would come to church every Sunday without fail, unless they were ill, for at least the next six months. Also, I encouraged him to get back into his AA meetings regularly. Their previous track record made me doubt whether they could even do these simple things, but apparently they were

desperate enough that they agreed. I guess they and myself as well, were willing to at least open the door just a crack for the God of the impossible to slip through.

And God did slip through that crack. They took to their morning prayer and Bible-study like a drowning person takes to a life-saver. When we met weekly, they were excited to talk about how just this one practice was opening up whole new worlds for them. And he did get back in AA, and they did start coming to church every week, and discovered a community of people who welcomed them and didn't shut them out because they weren't respectable enough. When his old boss saw the change in him, he even got his job back. When I left that church three years later, he was still sober, they were still married, they had been reconciled with their alienated children, and they had become solidly embedded in that faith community.

God's question to Sarah must have provoked her into leaving the door open just a crack as well. Our lesson today concludes by giving us a peek at the end of this part of Sarah and Abraham's story, about a year later, or perhaps a little less. It has not been a smooth ride of steadily increasing faith; they've hit some bumps in the road along the way, as we'll see next week. But the God of the impossible has kept the promise that Sarah found so laughable. Now Sarah is laughing again, only this time it's the laughter of one who knows the joke is on her, and yet what a glorious joke it is as she holds in her arms the flesh-and-blood evidence of God's faithfulness and power. And she named that miracle child Isaac, which means laughter. Her willingness to let her heart follow, even where her reason told her she was crazy, changed her laughter from incredulous disbelief, into the delighted, surprised laughter of pure joy.