

(Not) A Laughing Matter©

Genesis 17:1-8; 18:1-16

September 30, 2018

Rev. Dr. Sharlyn Gates

So today we continue looking at Abram and Sarai and the call to faith they answered. Now, we fast forward from last Sunday when Abram was 75 to the time that he is 99 years old. And still, God keeps promising that he will have many descendants and Abram will be the ancestor of many nations.

And the Lord tells Abram that he is giving him a new name – Abraham – which means Father of many nations or sons. And his wife, Sarai, would be called Sarah – which means princess.

Now, Abraham and Sarah had faith in God and believed that God was going to do something that would give Abraham a son but they could not believe that it could happen with Sarah – especially with Sarah – at her age.

Remember last week, we read that they were in Egypt because of the famine? That was one of those times when Abram took things into his own hands and had Sarai tell the Pharaoh that she was Abram's sister. Because of that, Abram was treated well and became very wealthy before their secret was found out and they were kicked out of Egypt.

One of the things they gained in wealth was servants and one of those servants was Hagar who served as Sarai's handmaiden. Sarai got the idea that since she was past the childbearing age, Abram should take Hagar as another wife and have a baby with her. Believe it or not, Abram did not argue with this idea. He did what Sarai said and Hagar conceived, which in the end, did not make Sarai very happy.

I won't go into the whole story of Hagar and Sarai but I would encourage you to read all of chapter 16 (and all of 17, as well) so you have the rest of the story.

So, Hagar has a son, whom the Lord says to name Ishmael. And Abram – now Abraham – says to the Lord *“Well, I have my son Ishmael. That must be the one you mean to fulfill this promise with.”*

To which the Lord assures Abraham that Ishmael is not the one he will have many descendants from (although he does say he will bless him.) God's plan specifically includes Sarah having a baby with Abraham and that baby is the one whom all these descendants of faith will come through.

If we had read on in chapter 17 we would hear this: God says to Abraham *“I will bless her, Sarah, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, *‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’*

So, Abraham laughs, but God is serious. We soon read of these strangers who visit. Abraham sees them coming and quickly arranges for a meal to serve them. Hospitality is so prevalent in middle east.

When I served the church in Parsons, Kansas, one of my parishioners was from Lebanon. If we went to visit Nehme and his wife, we learned quickly that we should be prepared to eat. A lot. It was best to go hungry to Nehme's house because while we talked with his wife, he was in the kitchen getting out all the food he had prepared – Tabouli and Baklava and many of other Lebanese dishes that were delicious. He also had us drink very, very strong coffee which, in Lebanese is called *Hell*.

It is a fact that the people in the Middle East take hospitality very, very seriously. You offend them if you turn down their hospitality.

And we see this hospitality with Abraham and these three visitors. Abraham tells Sarah to make a cake and he orders the servants to serve up the beef. He makes sure his guests have their feet washed, which in itself, is an act of welcome and hospitality.

And while Sarah is in the tent cooking, one of the three (which turns out be the Lord) asks where she is and Abraham replies she is in the tent. Then, the stranger God says *“this time next year, I'll return and Sarah will have a son.”*

Now what would you do if you were 90 years old and overheard this conversation and it was about you? Whether you were man or woman what would you do if you heard that you were going to be a parent of a baby at 90? Or 100? Or 50, for that matter?

Laugh! You would laugh. And laugh. And laugh!!! Right? I would laugh for sure.

And the Lord asked Abraham why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

And Sarah, suddenly afraid, denied it. *“I did not laugh.”* And the Lord said, *“Oh yes, you did laugh.”*

I envision that continuing with: *Did not. Did too. Did not. Did too!*

But the Bible doesn't tell us that happened. That's my addition to the story.

Seriously, though, what would you do if God came to you and you really believed it was God, calling your name, saying, “You, at your age, at this time in your life, are going to be used mightily and miraculously by me. I have a plan that includes your willingness to participate. And it will seem impossible to you – but all things are possible with me.

Would you laugh? Would you respond with openness? Would you run as far away as possible?

How do we hear God's call today? Do you believe He does still call people to fulfill his plans for the world? For the faith? Was Abraham and Sarah and their descendants whom we will

continue looking at through October – were they exceptions to the rule? Were they somehow more special, more useful, more important for God’s plan than we are? Does God still ask people to step out in faith and go to unknown places for the sake of the faith?

I believe the answer is yes. As baptized Christians – people who believe and follow Jesus Christ, God’s Son, our Savior – a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, we are a part of that long family history and we are still called today.

Yes, some people are specifically called to particular ministries – like pastor or missionary, or a nun, or evangelist or chaplain. There are many types of calls in ministry that are set aside in a way. But I believe the call to all kinds of vocations are just as important and just as much a call by God to serve and to spread the good news: nurse, a doctor, a journalist, a carpenter, a banker, a barber, a waitress, a cook, a teacher, a granddad or grandma, an aunt and uncle.

In all things we are to be people of faith, sharing the good news of God’s love and mercy in all the things we do in our lives. As Saint Francis of Assisi is known to have said, *“Preach Christ. And if all else fails, use words.”*

And we – as a congregation – are called together for a purpose. Holly Presbyterian Church did not just happen to become a church. We would not be here if Christ had not called us into existence.

We are here as a particular church in a specific time and place – for the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. We do have a call that involves us all. By the ministries we do and the mission and outreach we provide we are answering the call of God.

Yes, we come to church to be fed and to be comforted and inspired, and to worship, and it’s all important. But church is not all about what *we* need. It is about faithfully fulfilling Christ’s great commission. In Jesus’ words we hear that word God spoken to Abraham so long ago – that little two letter word that is sometimes hard to do.

GO!

“GO!” Jesus said, “And make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

We each have gifts and strengths and sometimes I think we believe like Abraham and Sarah that we are too old to be used by God and we tend to look at the church today and feel it is impossible to do much.

But it really is no laughing matter what God intends to do with us if we are open and willing to step out in obedience and try new things. As the Lord said to Abraham, *“Is anything too wonderful for God?”* Of course it’s not! We must believe and be willing. That is one of our acts of hospitality to God. Accepting what God says, believing and acting on faith.

We read in Hebrews 11:8-12

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; ¹⁰ for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

¹¹ By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.”

The fact is, as hospitable as Abraham was with the three strangers, Sarah had to be hospitable as well. She might have laughed but she was still willing to receive God's promise and to be used for God's plan. She too was offering hospitality to God.

In the end, 91 year old Sarah and 100 year old Abraham had a son, as God had promised. God named him Isaac, which means *Laughter*. And many nations and kings and many descendants came from Isaac, just as the Lord had promised.

And God had the last laugh!
Amen.

© Copyright 2018. All Rights Reserved.