

Today's scripture reading is from Genesis 18:1-15 and 21:1-7.

Hear God's word.

A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah

18 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. **2** Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,[a] do not pass your servant by. **4** Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. **5** Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs[b] of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

7 Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. **8** He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

10 Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. **11** Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. **12** So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

13 Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' **14** Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

21 Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did

for Sarah what he had promised. **2** Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. **3** Abraham gave the name Isaac[a] to the son Sarah bore him. **4** When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. **5** Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. **6** Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” **7** And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Sermon

I titled this sermon “**Promises, Promises**” not because it has anything to do with the Broadway play by the same name.

I don’t know much about that play, other than it was based on the film “The Apartment” which was a kind of screwball comedy about ambition and falling love.

I’m told that it is a fun, light, and uplifting play, and I like all those things.

I also like how the words, **Promises, Promises** roll off the tongue. They have a pleasant, alliterative quality to them, that creates a nice linguistic effect.

Promises—God’s promises—is the central theme of my sermon today. As I reflected on today’s scripture reading from Genesis, the phrase “**Sarah laughed to herself**” stood out and grabbed me.

Why is that?

What’s so curious about this elderly woman, Sarah, well beyond her child-bearing years, laughing when overhearing that she was going to conceive and have a baby?

The more conservative Scriptural interpretations of “**Sarah laughing to herself**” tend to focus on the phrase that appears in verse 15... “**for she was afraid.**”

That’s because, we, the readers, already know the identity of the persons speaking to Abraham to be God and two of his angels.

Perhaps, Sarah, unlike Abraham, figured this out too, and she is indeed “**afraid**” of having laughed in the face of the Old Testament all-powerful God.

But not so fast, right?

How else might we understand Sarah's reaction to this incredible news? I go back to something we frequently say in this congregation when we recite the Prayer of Confession.

That is, **“fear not, for ours in a loving God.”**

First, I don't believe Sarah would have ever laughed in God's face, or would made light of any gift of God's love and fidelity.

God had already been very good to Abraham and Sarah, protecting them from harm, guiding them on a path of faith.

However, I quote, “when, men and women, who are conscious of the greatness of God,

can be simple hearted enough to laugh at what might be the exaggerated pretensions of their own littleness,” they please our loving God.

Said another way, persons, and nations, who possess humbleness, and wholeness of spirit, and who can accept, and even laugh at their own delusions, are blessed with the sincerity of the truth and the courage of good humor.

Sure, some humor can be unwholesome, or careless, loud, crude or down-right mean, but persons who dump that type of cruel humor onto the world typically are looking to escape, from themselves, so that they might drown out the inner voice trying to encourage them to seek a life with some satisfying purpose.

For me, Sarah is one of those simple hearted persons, who in utter disbelief, and joy, could not help but laughing, silently, to herself, about her good fortune, and the glorious promises, that God was delivering.

Hers is the “blessed laughter of a person who rejoices in the goodness of God's world, who keeps her spirit humble and her heart sensitive to whatever is lovely” and true.

But things could have gone differently, for Abraham and Sarah, and for us.

There could have been no baby, no baby Isaac, and without Isaac, there would have been no descendants “who God tells us are to be “as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on seashore.”

There would have been no blessing for the nations of the earth, and no coming of the Messiah.

God's promises are fulfilled in the birth of Isaac and passed down to us.

The name Isaac, which in Hebrew means “God laughs,” links God's joyous laughter, with the laughter of Abraham and Sarah, and to us, in an

eternal chain of good nature.

Sarah testifies of the fulfillment of God's promise, stating "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.

In doing so, Sarah's laughter of disbelief has been transformed into laughter of joy that celebrates God's goodness.

Yet, you might be asking yourself, 'I understand that God promises many great things, and delivers on so much, but why then do 'bad things sometimes happen to good people, like you and me?'

How is it that God can be so good to Abraham and Sarah, give a miraculous promise of new life, but still allow for so much suffering in the world?

God is supposed to be all-good and all powerful.

This week, right down the road, a well-known actor and much beloved member of the Manchester community, was killed when a car crossed his path while riding his motorcycle.

The randomness of sad losses like that one and others are unexplainable, existing beyond human understanding.

Sad and unexplainable events challenge us, bringing into to question our understanding of God.

But should they compromise our faith in God's goodness, justice, and righteousness?

One of the most instructive life books I have read on matters of good and evil, randomness and chaos, is Rabbi Harold Kushner's "*When Bad Things Happen to Good People.*"

Kushner writes: "sometimes bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it."

"God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but God cannot always arrange it.

Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good," Rabbi Kushner chooses the God of Goodness.

And so do I.

If we can come to accept there are some things God does not control...like chaos...many good things become possible.

As humans, we desire, intently, that God is all-good and **also** all powerful. Psychologically speaking, the concept of an all-powerful God

makes the evil of irrationality and chaos feel less threatening. However, if we can accept that ours is a God of justice and goodness, and that God chooses to place limitations on God's own ability to control chaos and random events, then God can still be on our side when bad things happen to us. I do not believe that God is the cause of our misfortunes. Bad things happen to good people sometimes out of bad luck, because of bad people, or the inevitable consequences of being mortal.

Finally, I don't believe God thinks less of God's self by accepting God's own self-determined limitations.

Like us, like Sarah, even God discovers joy in the sincerity of truth.

"Painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehaviors, nor are they part of God's grand plan."

When a person suffers from cancer, or other ailments, we should not hold God responsible, as there are other causes.

That said, me and again we all have witnessed God give those who suffer the strength to take each day as it comes.

Rabbi Kushner adds, "God wants good-hearted, righteous people to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even God can't bring that about."

So, in closing, today, on this Father's Day, we celebrate Abraham for his faithfulness and his hospitality to strangers.

He is a father that fathers can look up to.

And we celebrate Sarah, who, despite her initial disbelief, joyously celebrates the possibilities of God's goodness and God's shared humanity.

Our God is a good, loving and forgiving God.

Our God shares our joys, our imperfections, and loves to laugh along beside us.

The question I leave you with is this:

can you love and accept a God despite God's choosing to limit God's control of chaos and randomness?

If you can, then go and find joy and meaning and **great promise** in this less than perfect world.

Pray with me:

God of compassion, God of promises fulfilled,
you have opened the way for us
and brought us to yourself.
Pour your love into our hearts,
that, overflowing with joy,
we may freely share the blessings of your realm
and faithfully proclaim the good news of Christ. Amen.

Sources:

1. New Interpreter's Commentary, Genesis
2. Kushner, Harold S., *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Anchor Books, New York, NY, 1981

Prayer of Pastoral Care

June 18, 2023 Fathers' Day

Our Silent Meditation from Psalm 118 reminds us,
"Give thanks to the LORD, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever." Jesus Christ summons us to answer God's call of mercy. Our response is: **hear our prayer.**

Eternal, birthing God, you bring all things visible and invisible into being. We pray for the earth you created. Your Spirit brooded over creation like a mother bird. Heal the oceans' dead zones, and the rain forests' slashed and burnt scars. Lead us and all your people to be good shepherds of your world's life. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all people of the earth. Bring your peace, justice, and compassion to every household, village, city, and nation. We pray for all enduring life in the midst of violence. We pray for justice and respect for the rule of law in our country and in all lands. Bind up the wounds of racial hatred. Speak your "Be still!" to wars of religion, ideology, and territorial aggression. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

On this Father's Day Sunday, we pray for all fathers, including those who are fathers in truth, if not by blood. Thank you for all men and women who participate in works of caring and compassion, and who lead us in acts of courage and justice for your kingdom's sake. Restore all who are weighed down by concerns for health and well-being in facing their lives in this world. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Hear our prayers for those on this church's prayer list. ...

Holy Trinity, giver of love, life, and future, help us to dream of what you see; help us to imagine what you can do. Help us to be patient and faithful as we look forward to the new life you began and will complete through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

OFFERING Let us present our offerings for the mission of the church, bearing witness to God's kingdom and rule.

***DOXOLOGY**

***PRAYER** Almighty God, receive the gifts we bring in gratitude for your care for us. May we bless you with the dedication of our lives; through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.