

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 27, 2020

Introduction

This week's homily will be a little different. My usual practice is to preach on the appointed Gospel for the day. However, I have chosen another text because I think that it better fits what we are experiencing today. Its title is 'Laughing at God.' I hope that you do not think be irreverent. Abraham and Sarah left their comfortable home in the city of Ur to journey hundreds of miles to a new land. In the twelfth chapter of Genesis, we discover that Abraham had a vision that directed him to take his clan and journey west to a 'Land of Promise.' The source of this vision was a deity previously unknown to him. Not only did this new God promise a land, but Abraham and Sarah were also promised that they would become the forebears of a great nation; even though they were elderly. As the story develops in Genesis, this promissory relationship was a covenant that would stretch far into the future.

This is not the time for me to write in detail about covenant theology. What strikes me as being relevant today is the nature of the journey that Abraham and Sarah took *in faith* because of the promise of land and progeny. Today, our journey of faith is also a journey that is taking us into unknown lands. We live with the uncertainty of an economic crisis in our nation, damaging political polarization among our people, and the ever-present coronavirus that has changed our lives in ways we could not have imagined six months ago.

So, enjoy the story and the questions it raises. *What kind of journey is this? Why have the bright and shining promises have lost a good deal of their luster? Where is God in all this? What can blame Sarah for her bitter laughter? Who can blame us for our bitter laughter?*

I don't know if there are answers to these particular questions. But I do take comfort in the story of Sarah laughing at God and God's response. I hope it will be helpful for you also.

Outdoor worship and Covid 19: We will worship outside at both Immanuel and Bethel on this upcoming Sunday, September 27. In October, our outdoor worship services will be on October 11 and 18 at the usual times. Please continue to wear masks and practice social distancing. Our public health officials are seeing signs that infection rates are increasing among those who are younger and lesser populated counties in our state. We will continue to monitor the situation.

Call process update: *As I mentioned last week, our parish Ministry Site Profile has been completed, approved by the church councils of Bethel and Immanuel, and submitted to the NE MN Synod.* Pastor Robert Munneke has consented to submit a letter of reference

about our congregations that will be distributed with our profile. Now that our Profile has been submitted, it is available to all candidates within our synod as well as the entire ELCA. I have been conversation with Deacon Brenda Tibbetts who is the bishop's assistant who works with the call process. She and I will continue to talk as new candidates become available. Potential candidates can have their personal profiles sent to any congregation. Both church councils are seeking members to serve on the call committee – four members from each congregation. Please consider serving on this very important parish committee.

As your intentional interim pastor, I will not be involved in the interviews or the decision-making process of the call committee. I will serve as the liaison with the NE MN Synod office and be available to answer general questions about the call process. Members of the call committee are committed to confidentiality as they interview candidates. This protects potential candidates as well as the call committee from misunderstandings. Please support them with your prayers.

When the call committee selects a candidate of choice, the candidate's profile and proposed financial package will be presented to both church councils for approval. When approved by both councils, congregational meetings are scheduled as required by the constitutions of each congregation to call the candidate of choice as pastor for each congregation. They each congregation will vote on their share of the proposed financial package. Approval from both congregations is required to complete the process. Both Jerry Lochner and Brian Lindgren are ex-officio, non-voting members of the call committee.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to call me. Also, should you want a copy of the Ministry Site Profile, please contact your congregation's president. This is an exciting time for our parish!

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Scripture Lesson – Genesis 18.1–15, 21.1–7

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 favor 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.”

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as was promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

“Laughing at God”

Let us pray. The Book of Psalms is a collection of prayers used regularly by God’s people for both community worship and individual meditation. The Psalms are very human in their perspective as emotions run from joy to desperation. They oftentimes give voice to feelings and questions that trouble us deeply. But having said this, one must remember two things. First, the Psalmist trusts that God hears all prayers offered by those calling upon his name. And second, the Psalmist knows that God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stand behind the answers to all prayers. Psalm 85 is prayer for those who need the assurance that God is still faithful to God’s promises. For Christians, these promises take on new meaning as Jesus invites us to his table as a sign of the new covenant he makes with sinners.

Incline thy ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.

Preserve my life, for I am godly; save thy servant who trusts in thee.

Thou art my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to thee I cry all the day.

Gladden the soul of thy servant, O Lord, for to thee, I lift up my soul.
For thou, O Lord, art good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all
who call on thee.

Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; harken to my cry of supplication.
In the day of my trouble I call upon thee, for thou dost answer me . . .
I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God with my whole heart, and I will glorify
thy name forever.

For great is thy steadfast love toward me; thou hast delivered my soul
from the depths of Sheol. Amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord
Jesus Christ. Amen.**

It was mid-day and the sun beat down on the sand and rock. There was no shade
anywhere. Other than a few palm trees, any vegetation had long-since shriveled up and
died. Even at the *Oasis of Mamre*, there was no escape. One could only sit in the shade
of palm tree or under hide from the sun in a tent. The cool of the desert night was still
hours away.

**But much to Abraham's surprise, he saw three wayfarers on the road approaching the
oasis.** This was a strange sight because no one traveled during the heat of the day. So
Abraham did what every desert chieftain would do: He ran out to meet them invited
them to spend the afternoon resting in the shade. Abraham promised them cool water
to drink and a meal for strength at dusk.

**While Abraham and the strange travelers rested, the servants busied themselves
preparing the meal . . . Meat and vegetables.** By custom, Abraham's wife Sarah stayed
out of sight and prepared bread and cakes for the meal. Etiquette dictated that the
women of the household remain safely hidden from the eyes of male visitors outside of
the clan. But that did not stop Sarah. She was curious about what the men were talking
about. So she hid behind the tent door and listened to their conversation.

What Sarah heard that day was not the usual talk of camels and weather. She heard one
of the travelers say, **'I WILL SURELY RETURN TO YOU IN THE SPRING AND YOU SHALL
HAVE A SON.'** Sarah could only laugh out loud. She thought to herself, 'My husband is
old and I am old . . . Shall I still have a son?' Then the stranger, who was the Lord God,
Abraham's covenant partner, said, **'WHY DID SARAH LAUGH? DOES SHE NOT BELIEVE
THE PROMISE OF THE ALMIGHTY? IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR THE LORD? AT THE
APPOINTED TIME, SARAH SHALL BEAR YOU A SON.'**

Laughing at God . . . Who dares to laugh at God? I love this story because it's so real . . . so earthy . . . And it's oddly humorous. Can you just imagine the situation? Abraham and Sarah are well beyond middle age. And now this strange God that Abraham worships promises the birth of a son. Think about it: Walkers and baby carriages are a strange combination for a retired couple. And for obvious reasons, there are no maternity benefits for people on Social Security. So Sarah laughed . . . Who can blame her? What she heard defied all logic. It went against all that she and her husband knew to be true. But this God of Abraham's seemed to be the God of the improbable, if not the impossible.

It had all started when Abraham was much younger. He had one of those so-called religious experiences. Understand that he was already a man of standing in his community . . . a person of considerable wealth. Then he had a vision. A new god appeared to Abraham and commanded him to take his family and leave his home in the city of Ur. He was to go west to a far land that this God would show him . . . A land which God promised to Abraham and his descendants forever.

This command took the form of a covenant – A promissory relationship that bound God and God's people together forever. Nearly four thousand years ago, the Lord God said to Abraham, **'GO FROM YOUR COUNTRY, YOUR KINDRED, AND YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE TO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU. I WILL MAKE YOU A GREAT NATION AND I WILL BLESS YOU.'** Genesis offers no comment about Abraham and Sarah's state of mind. It only reports that they did as the Lord commanded. They left everything behind and would never again return home.

As people of the twenty-first century, it's difficult to understand the impossibility of what God asked Abraham and Sarah to do. Distance means nothing to us. Going to Duluth to shop and coming home the same day is not uncommon. Modern communications — our cell phones — keep us linked one to another in ways that were undreamed of even ten years ago. The ancients had no such luxury. Rarely did a man take his family from their ancestral home. Families lived on land that had been theirs for generations. Country, kindred, and family were a person's identity. To leave one's homeland was to become a nonperson. To leave was simply unthinkable . . . Unthinkable to everyone but God.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is really about faith . . . Faith that manifests itself in a journey shaped by a promise. Their new life included a son when God deemed it appropriate; a bouncing baby boy guaranteed to keep their lives interesting.

But all this notwithstanding, Abraham and Sarah's story illustrates the ambiguity of life; something we can identify with. The Land of Promise was already home to another people. Even more disappointing, Abraham and Sarah would not possess the land, but rather, it would be home to their descendants. To make matters worse, God seemed terribly slow in fulfilling the original promise of a son. So when no child was forthcoming, Abraham tried to force God's hand . . . Abraham impregnated Sarah's servant Hagar and claimed that this was God's child of promise. But this was not what God intended. All that resulted was family discord that would prove problematic as the future unfolded.

With a touch of irony, the writer of Genesis does not dwell on these missteps. We are told only that Abraham and Sarah built an altar to worship the Lord God at each stage of their journey. Although Genesis does not say so, I am certain that Abraham and Sarah's journey could be traced by the altars built along the way. Each altar was a place to make contact with the God who called them. Each altar was a plea that God would honor the promises made to Abraham and Sarah years before. And each altar was a sign that they continued to trust the God who had called them to this strange, seemingly unending journey. As one year moved into the next, Abraham and Sarah must have questioned the validity of God's promises. Perhaps they had misunderstood what God has asked. Perhaps they had made God angry. Or perhaps, God has changed God's mind. Who knew?

Like Abraham and Sarah, we live in world broken or delayed promises. Like them, we live with ambiguity when we seek certainty. The promise of technology has proven hollow as the environment is slowly poisoned. The promise of economic development has proven false as more and more people struggle to make a living, and sometimes, even lack proper food and shelter. The promise of self-fulfillment has proven destructive as public and private civility break down, as family life disintegrates, and as our young people look for boundaries and guidance from a society too self-absorbed to give it to them.

Unfortunately we have come to expect that promises will be broken. That's the way life is. God's promises sometimes seem too good to be true. Illness, the death of a loved one, the continuing economic crisis, the estrangement of family members or friends all seem to point to God's broken promises. *Where is God when we need God the most? What good are all these promises. And what is going on with the pandemic? Surely this is not God's way of giving us the promised 'abundant' life.* When our hopes and our dreams lay in ruins around us, it's easy to accuse God of betraying us and forgetting the promise to bless and care for us.

But then God visited Abraham and Sarah as the Oasis of Mamre. When Sarah heard God say to her husband, ‘I WILL SURELY RETURN TO YOU IN THE SPRING AND YOU SHALL HAVE A SON,’ she laughed. Sarah actually laughed at God . . . She laughed out of frustration . . . She laughed because she’d heard it all before . . . And she laughed because babies just didn’t happen to people their age. **‘My husband is old and I am old . . . Shall I still have a son?’** The more she thought about it, the funnier it seemed.

This story is so great. The writer of Genesis continues it three chapters later, **‘The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.’** Sarah had to trade in her walker for a baby carriage. The woman who dared to laugh at God was surprised. God’s was vindicated. The child of promise was finally born. They called the child Isaac . . . A transliteration of the Hebrew word *Yishak* which literally means *‘He laughs.’*

Who’s laughing now? . . . Everyone is laughing. Abraham and Sarah laugh as they see their new child. And God laughs at their unbelief and gave them their long-promised future.

I think that we are all on a journey not unlike that of Abraham and Sarah. Our journeys began on the day we were baptized in the name of Jesus. As disciples, we join Abraham and Sarah on their pilgrimage of faith. We also worship at altars along the way. The first is the altar at which God calls us in baptism; the last is that from which we are committed to the Lord in death. In between, there are altars beyond number. We find them at confirmations, weddings, hospitals, funerals, and in places known only to us.

The good news today is that we are not alone on our journey. God became the ultimate *‘Child of Promise’* in the birth of Jesus . . . The *‘Immanuel [God with us]* . . . The One who dies so that each one of us might have life; both in this world and in the next. One might even say that we have become *‘children of promise’* because of our baptism in Jesus’ name.

The even better news is that God is the Promise Keeper. God remembers the divine promises, both spoken and unspoken. The Almighty God does not forget those claimed as children. **In these times that threaten our wellbeing, God is faithful even when we are not.** We are God’s children and our very identities are rooted in that promise . . . A promise guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Laughing at God? Who would have thought that an elderly couple like Abraham and Sarah would have a child?

Laughing at God? Who would ever believe that God could love this broken world of ours?

Laughing at God? Who would ever believe that God raise Jesus from the dead?

Laughing at God? I don't think so . . . The joke is on us if we choose not to believe.

Laughing at God? Better yet: We laugh with God because there is joy and laughter in heaven when you and I finally realize that we are saved . . . *Children of Promise forever.*
Amen.