

“Rooted in Promise”

Second Sermon in a Six-Week Series

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

New Revised Standard Version

With a rather dark sense of humor, Irish writer Jonathan Swift once said, “Promises, like pie crusts are made to be broken.” And honestly, when you look at our world, it can feel that way.

Politicians make campaign promises they good and well know they won’t be able to keep once they take office.

Even with the best intentions, parents make promises to their children than they desperately want to keep but can’t keep because of life circumstances.

When we marry, partners make promises we vow to keep “*for better, for worse*” “*‘til death do us part*” - but then, often (over 50% of the time actually) something other than death often causes us to part. Every 13 seconds, there is one divorce in America. Which means: There are 9 divorces in the two

minutes it takes for a couple to recite their wedding vows. More than 554 divorces occur during your typical two hour romantic comedy movie. 1,385 divorces happen during the average five-hour wedding reception. And there are 19,353,568 divorces over the course of an average first marriage that lasts 8 years and ends, of course, in divorce.¹

Isn’t it depressing that there’s even a website that calculates these sorts of statistics? That calculates how often we break our promises to one another?

Do you know what there’s *not* a website for? The number of promises kept.

Because promises that are kept doesn’t really make for good front page news, and it’s also the nature of promises that we expect them to be kept and it’s only when they are *not* kept

¹ Information accessed on September 15, 2019 at <https://www.wf-lawyers.com/divorce-statistics-and-facts/>.

that we take notice. Otherwise we take them for granted.

I suppose we can all expect a certain number of broken promises from people, we are only human after all. But what about promises from God? Are those promises any different?

Today, as we continue with the Narrative Lectionary we get a close up view of one of God's promises, and we get that view through the lens of laughter. In today's story, we see cynical laughter turned to celebratory laughter. And laughter, as it turns out, is a good indicator as to whether we believe that God will keep God's promises to us...because through looking at our laughter we are kind of able to gauge our ability and willingness to suspend our reason and rationale for the sake of holding space for surprise and for hope...and maybe, even, a miracle.

Genesis 18 and 21 give us an amazing example of what it means to be Rooted in Promise, even when the fulfillment of that promise is long past due

and no longer plausible by human metrics.

We join the story of Abraham and Sarah mid-point today - or 'mid-promise.' It's important for us to remember that Abraham and Sarah have had many heart-breaking years of waiting and disappointment that they have endured as a childless couple²...a circumstance that brought more than just personal pain, but public shame, as well.

In Genesis 12, God makes a promise to a man named Abram, whose wife, Sarai, we are told *"was barren; she had no child"* (11:30). The three-fold promise to Abram is: 1) he would have a land; 2) he would become a *"great nation"* (that is, have many descendants); and 3) he would be blessed to be a blessing: *"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (12:3).³

For our purposes today, notice that without the birth of a child (the promise hidden behind door #2), neither of the other two promises really matter. But

² Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7," *Working Preacher* (Sept. 18, 2011), accessed on Sept. 15, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1087.

³ Jacobson, *ibid*.

the years go by. Sarai remains barren. She and Abram have no child. And they grow old.⁴

In Genesis 15, quite a bit later, God speaks to Abram again, renewing the promise. God takes Abram outside on a very starry night and declares, *"Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. . . . so shall your descendants be"* (15:6). But you can't have a sky-full of descendants when you don't have even one child. And Sarai remains barren. She and Abram have no child. And they grow older still.⁵

So it's understandable that in Genesis 16, Sarai was tired of waiting for the promised child, so she took the promise into her own hands (probably to give herself a sense of agency and power in what was a powerless situation). She actually suggests that Abram try to have a child with her slave, Hagar. And *"Abram listened to the voice of Sarai"* (16:2). And finally, Abram gets his child, a son named Ishmael. Abraham was 86 years old. But this left Sarai out of the promise...what about

her? Wasn't she part of the covenant?⁶ Well, even though she tried to take the promise into her own hands, and thought she had fulfilled it for Abram and for the "outside world to see," God did not give up on the promise for her.

In Genesis 17, God appears again to Abram to repeat the promise yet *another* time. God changes Abram's name to Abraham and says, *"I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations"* (17:5). And God makes it clear that Sarai is part of this covenant, too: *"Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her"* (17:16).⁷

Now, Abraham has quite a reaction!. First, he falls on his face and laughs (17:17). But then, he does something even more unexpected. He asks God *not* to keep this particular promise. His son by Hagar was enough for him. Perhaps because he just wanted this painful saga to be over with, he prays: *"O that Ishmael might live in your sight, O Lord."*

⁴ Jacobson, *ibid.*

⁵ Jacobson, *ibid.*

⁶ Jacobson, *ibid.*

⁷ Jacobson, *ibid.*

And knowing all of this background is what allows us to land where we are with our text today and truly understand just how much this promise had moved into Abraham and Sarah's lives and made itself at home in their souls. For better or worse.

As it's been made clear already, the promise that Abraham hears (and that Sarah overhears) in Genesis 18 was not a new promise, which surely made it even harder to believe, right? What kind of promise is harder to believe than a promise that has been *repeatedly* not kept? What kind of promise-maker is harder to believe than one who has continually not kept a promise?⁸ Surely, at some point anger and resentment just set in. After almost a half century of hearing this promise again and again and yet bearing no child, and not even that but aging far past the age of child-bearing and still hearing that promise...well, it must have felt like a slap in the face, salt in the wound, right?! A sick joke? Who in their right mind would continue to believe that the promise God had

supposedly made would ever come true? They'd be fools to have such faith.

So when God, via these three messengers, yet again repeats the promise, "*I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son*" one can hardly blame Sarah for laughing. Verse twelve says, "*Sarah laughed to herself.*" The phrase translated as "to herself" (*beqirbah*) is interesting. More literally, the term might be translated "inside of herself" or "in her guts,"⁹ which suggests less that Sarah laughed quietly, and more than she had a great, big belly laugh at God and the promise that God keeps making and keeps on not keeping. But there is also a subtle reminder of Sarah's empty womb. It is hard not to feel in Sarah's belly laugh the painful laugh of one who has hoped for a child, but who has grown too old now to conceive.¹⁰ It's just not possible, so the promise is absurd...and unfair, and cruel, and yes, even comical. Laughter is often a self-protection mechanism for us, a self-defense response.

⁸ Jacobson, *ibid.*

⁹ Jacobson, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Jacobson, *ibid.*

With the pain of barrenness and the passing of year after year after year...what are Abraham and Sarah to do? At what point does faith become fantasy? And when does resignation to the inevitable become really the most pragmatic response? I mean, it's no wonder Sarah laughed. We have to protect ourselves from the cruelty of pain somehow, right? Even if it means doubting and deflecting God's promises.

However with this direct response of closed, cynical laughter though, there's also a coexisting response of openness that I think we need to pay attention to. The role of hospitality in this story is important. Abraham and Sarah and their servant show extravagant hospitality to these three strangers. In the biblical world, hospitality was the chief social virtue; it was far more than a matter of being polite, it was a moral expectation, a "sacred duty."¹¹ There were no hotels or inns for travelers back then. So everyone's house was a potential Air BnB and before

5 star ratings were a thing, 5 star hospitality was the norm.

But the message of Genesis 18 is not that *because* Abraham and Sarah showed hospitality, *therefore* God renewed and kept the promise. Rather, for me this raises the question of: what role does hospitality play in our lives, in our hearts, in terms of making space for God to act and to fulfill promises? In terms of keeping space in our hearts open to the unexpected? Or keeping us in a space where we can be surprised by grace? In other words, when we practice hospitality, whether it's to strangers or friends, or even creating more space in our own hearts to love ourselves a bit more...then it seems like we are also creating space for God to move and act in our lives in a way that we could easily miss when we are hyper-focused on ourselves or closed off. Hospitality helps us turn our attention outward and upward. When our we loosen our grip on life, when we are more generous with what we have, could it be that we have eyes to

¹¹ Lawrence Stager and Philip King, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pg 61.

see and ears to hear how God is being generous with us?

Maybe there's a promise in the mix that we've been missing out on because we've been closed down to others, and therefore to God? Limiting our vision...living in the "expected and predictable" instead of making ourselves vulnerable to the "unexpected and the unpredictable." I don't know. It's just a thought. But this story of a promise fulfilled is definitely tied to hospitality somehow...and I think that the metaphor of creating space in our homes, and therefore our hearts, for God cannot be overlooked. God doesn't work on our timetable. God shows up unannounced and we might miss the promise itself if we just ignore the knock at the door and turn away the stranger in our midst, or if we just shut down our borders or limit our resources or just hope and pray that someone else will help. What does Jesus tell us in Matthew? That if we do it to the least of these, we do it to him. And that if we turn away anyone in need of water or shelter, we are turning him

away. You see hospitality to the stranger, to the traveler, to the immigrant, to the refugee - this is not an option in our faith - Jesus makes that clear.

And yet, in the midst of this kind of radical hospitality, the passage in Genesis 18 ends on a closed note: Sarah laughs. Cynically. Tired-ly. It's the "yeah right" kind of sarcastic laugh that we all know too well. When called out, she denies having laughed. And the messenger says, "*O yes, you did laugh.*" Such a weird line...and it's the only time in all of the Abraham/Sarah story that God ever talks directly to Sarah.

Why does Sarah get this response? We don't know. But we can say this: The exchange emphasizes the word *laughter* (Hebrew: *tsachaq*). The word occurs in various forms four different times within just a few verses (vs 12-15). This emphasis sets the scene for the surprising turn of fortunes in chapter 21.¹²

The most important phrase in the exchange between the messenger and Sarah is the

¹² Jacobson, *ibid*.

messenger's question back to Sarah after she scoffs: *"Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?"* The messenger asks: *"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"*

Sarah, made cynical by the passing years, exhausted by God's unkept promises, afraid to start to hope again, clearly thinks that there are plenty of things too wonderful for the Lord.¹³ And yet, while Sarah laughs cynically, we can imagine that God continues to smile compassionately, knowing what was to come. Because it's not over.

The second scene in this week's story brings the fulfillment of the whole series of promises made in Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 18. The child Isaac is born, whose very name means *laughter*. When God renewed the promise to Abraham in chapter 17, he laughed. When God renewed the promise yet again in chapter 18, Sarah laughed, too. So when the child was born, you could say, God had the last laugh, or the lasting laugh. The child was named "laughter" and

Sarah said, *"God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me"* (vs 6).¹⁴

This is the laughter of celebration, not cynicism. And this is what makes laughter such a beautiful thing. Because laughter is malleable, isn't it? We can laugh until we cry or cry until we laugh. And in this case what was once a laughter born of pain is now a laughter born of celebration.

Sarah's laughter when she overhears the Lord (via this messenger) say to Abraham that she would bear a son, is a laughter people like you and me know well -- it's a laughter of dis-belief, of cynicism even. A "yeah right" kind of laughter.

We laugh Sarah's first laugh, not because we have faith, but because we find it impossible to have it sometimes. That is the disturbing truth being held up before us in this week's story: that most times, faith is not a reasonable act and the promise of God is not just a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to

¹³ Jacobson, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Jacobson, *ibid.*

everything else in our lives. Faith requires risk, and even some suspension of disbelief. Faith disrupts. To be Rooted in Promise may mean that we are uprooted by what we thought was impossible or even impractical. To be rooted in faith may mean we have to uproot the messages that tell us that we are not worthy or deserving.

Abraham and Sarah laughed because they had reached a dead end in their lives and because they had adjusted to it. They had accepted their hopelessness just the way, if we are honest, we too accommodate ourselves to all those barren places in our lives where the call to believe in "a new thing that God will do" seems, quite frankly, nonsensical¹⁵ and impractical and just plain foolish or naïve.

We can get so rooted in our pain that we forget about God's promises.

And yet, there is another kind of laughter to which the promise made in this story also

points. A very different kind of laughter. The laughter, not of Sarah or Abraham, but the laughter of the One who keeps promises outside of the bounds of our understanding of time - whether or not we have the faith to see it. Sometimes we have to wait to share in that kind of laughter, just as Abraham and Sarah had to wait, too.¹⁶ But the waiting is worth it, as we see. Because it's not just God, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac who share in this joy, in this laughter. It's us too. Sarah says in Genesis 21:6, *"God has brought laughter for me; [so that] everyone who hears will laugh with me."*

Do you hear that laughter? Do you hear the promises of God kept in this story? Promises that go beyond any human logic or rationale? Promises that the world would say are long overdue and at this point, impossible?

Can you hear Sarah's laughter? And join in? Maybe if not for your own longing or promise, then maybe just in celebration for her?

¹⁵ Barry J. Robinson, "Keeping the Faith in Babylon," *Fernstone* (2002, 2005), accessed on Sept. 15, 2019 at

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache: http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or11-keeping.php>.

¹⁶ Robinson, *ibid*.

Sometimes when we can't see how God is working in our lives or where God is leading us, we can see it in the lives of others...and it reminds us...that God is still at work in the world.

Verse 14 really is the crux of the matter: "*Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?*" This is the question of God's people, the question that echoes in all of our places of doubt and disbelief when we wonder why the world is not as it should be.¹⁷

This week, I invite you to pay attention to the things you find yourself laughing at. The comments that make you uncomfortable. The newsreel that kind of makes you cringe with nervous laughter. The people who you cannot be yourself around and so you laugh as a defense mechanism...or as a way to fit in or deflect attention. What are the things you find yourself laughing at with cynicism or skepticism or doubt or despair? Because it could be in those

places and spaces where need to open up our hearts a bit more. It could be those very moments where we realize how we might have closed off our hearts to surprise and to hope and to miracles?

What does it mean to be Rooted in Promise? Maybe it means, that we choose to never give up hope, even when hope is not a given. Maybe it means that on our darkest days, we choose a laugh of celebration over a laugh of cynicism. In the midst of all that is wrong and broken in the world and in our lives - what is good and what is right? Can we root ourselves in those things?

Ultimately, to be Rooted in Promise is simply to recognize that we Live Life in Hope-filled Expectation that God will act in our lives...and in the world. And that for *everyone* be Rooted in Promise we might have to have some parts of our lives uprooted along the way. Because maybe, just maybe, we are a part of what fulfills the promise for others.

¹⁷ Geoff McElroy, "June 15, 2008 - Fifth Sunday After Pentecost," *Desert Scribbings* (June 11, 2008), accessed on Sept. 15, 2019 at

<https://gmcelroy.typepad.com/desertscribbings/2008/06/june-15-2008---fifth-sunday-after-pentecost.html>.

Perhaps the best lesson of all that we learn from today's text is that to be Rooted in Promise means we are ready and poised to show hospitality to strangers...for in making room for others, we make room for God. Who knows what could be possible in the world if we would all just open our hearts a bit wider?

Who in our world needs a roof, a home, a meal, a shot at a new life, a second (or third) chance? When we look at those who need these things...where are we in the scene? Are we opening up our homes, our borders, our churches, our hearts to show hospitality? Or are we standing behind a closed door waiting for someone else to do it? Because the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, the family member is not going away. Their need will be unmet until it is met. Will we be the ones to make their promise come true?

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" I think it's up to you and me to answer that question. The promise of God's presence is with us everyday and with it is the power of what is possible when we love God

and love others. It's always risky. Being rooted in faith and in God's promise does not mean living without risk, quite the contrary. It means being strong enough to endure whatever the risk brings. Because with risk, comes great reward. And maybe even some laughter too.

Amen.