

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, September 17, 2023

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So, friends, I...I'm going to read from Genesis in just a moment, the 18th chapter, verses 9 through 15, and then skip ahead a little bit to the 21st chapter and read verses one through seven. But just by way of giving you a bit of context for our time this morning, just prior to where we'll start reading, God has made a covenant with Abraham. And chapter 17— it is the time when God says that Abraham will rule over a nation, actually have amongst him a nation, an inheritance to people that are his heirs and Sarah's as well, and...and those people will populate the whole Earth. And it's an important moment, a hinge moment if you will, in the history of humanity's relationship with God. And then we move into chapter 18, and all of a sudden three visitors, passersby actually, they're not supposed to be visitors, but they make their way down the road past Abraham and Sarah's tent. Abraham calls them to come back. He asked Sarah to prepare for them just a small meal. He asked them to be seated and bless him and them with his presence, and then Sarah does that. She makes a couple of cakes and a little bit of water, and they share in a meal together. Then we get to this portion of the text that I'll read.

### Genesis 18:9-15

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 be fruitful?' 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.'

### 21:1-7

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. 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; and 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.'

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen  
Let us pray together.

Gracious and life-giving spirit, meet us once again in this place.  
Make yourself known amongst us and within us. Quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day.

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

So just a few verses earlier the promise has been made to Abraham, a covenant between Abraham, this hundred-year-old man, and God.

A covenant that there would be a nation that would bear Abraham's name and Sarah's as well, and then all of a sudden, we have this odd interaction—three folks traveling down a road very much an ‘entertaining angels unaware’ sort of situation here.

And one of the strangers speaks a word of prophecy to Abraham.

“Your wife is going to bear a child.”

And Sarah's just behind the thin veil of the tent, and she hears this, and she giggles to herself. She laughs. Later her son Isaac, which means laughter, will come forth of course, but at this time they don't know that. They just have this odd stranger, who's been walking down the road, who stops by for a piece of cake and some water, telling them something miraculous is going to happen. I'm 42 now. Still haven't had kids. I might. I think often about being 42, and haven't met anybody yet, so it might be 43, 44, 45. I think about what it's going to be like to be a dad at 46 or 47 or 48, the energy it might take if that ever happens.

Abraham's a hundred.

Sarah is about the same age. Those of you who had children in your 20s or your 30s or even in your early 40s, then you know what energy it takes. I wonder if her giggle was about imagining getting up early in the morning. I wonder if she found it humorous—the idea of Abraham not sleeping late but getting up and maybe changing the diapers in the middle of the night. Maybe it wasn't so humorous that she would have a child, but the idea of them actually raising a child, maybe that was what brought some laughter to her.

Or maybe Sarah, like us, couldn't see the thing that that stranger was naming. Maybe that was what brought forth laughter. Maybe it was a little more sarcastic.

Maybe Sarah couldn't imagine the possibility of having a child in her old age. She thought it was comical to even think about it. “Why are you laughing?” God says. “What's so funny?” and Sarah's response—I love it. “I didn't laugh.”

“God, who gave me ears and created sound, a God who sees and knows all things, he didn't hear me laugh. That was someone else behind the thin opening of the tent.”

If we're honest, Sarah's skepticism is perfectly reasonable.

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There is no part about her physical makeup or her age that would say that it is reasonable to imagine that she would bear forth into the world—a child. Her skepticism over the words of first the stranger and then later of the Lord is well founded. So maybe we have to dig a little bit deeper into that knowing laugh.

If Sarah had responded in some other way....

What if she had been immediately hopeful that the words of the stranger were actually true?

That would have necessitated that she take a posture of the possibility of God at work. And if we're being really honest, hope is a scary, scary thing. Can you imagine how many times Sarah hoped that she would bear a child? Some of you can. Some of you know how difficult that journey is, how difficult to be in that space.

Her skepticism is not only completely reasonable, but if she was indeed fearful to hope, that would be well founded as well.

There's this symmetry also as we found last week in our earlier text in Genesis. There's this symmetry with a story that's going to come much later in the story of God's people. It seems that God shows up quite often when it comes to the birth of children and...and often surprises people. It was Zachariah, who was in the midst of the holy of holies when he received word that he and his wife...that they would have a child as well. That one might be called John the Baptist, and it is his skepticism in the moment that renders him silent, unable to speak during Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Skepticism is reasonable. It's perhaps more honest. And if we're honest, we're probably not all that different from Sarah. It is difficult for us to Imagine the Impossible thing actually coming to fruition.

It's difficult, perhaps, because we've imagined it over and over and over again, and we have been disappointed over and over and over again.

Or perhaps—

Perhaps we have become jaded by that, allowed the disappointment to... to change our expectations of the God of all the universe. We have low expectations not just of people, yes, but also even more so, perhaps, of God. It strikes me, though, that this text isn't so much about Isaac. It is about imagination. it's not so much about Sarah birthing a child into the world. More than that it is about Sarah's willingness and Abraham's as well to imagine the holy work of God, to just for a moment suspend all that disappointment, to be unafraid to lean into hope, and to think that God might be able to author something.

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I was speaking with a friend earlier this week, who pastors a church not too far from us here. She was telling me this story that I quite honestly didn't believe upon first hearing, and it's an abnormal story. She had a dear friend in her parish, who had received a significant cancer diagnosis—far along the path of the disease, gone through chemo and radiation, and yet the cancer was still there. And then she went in for a test just a couple weeks ago, and the scans came back clear. My friend happens to be the medical power of attorney and has all the information released to her as well, so the doctor called her after calling the doctor's patient, my friend's friend.

My friend was stunned to hear the news and said, “How could this have happened?” The doctor said, “I don't have a medical explanation for this. That's why I'm calling you, preacher.”

My friend said, “You know, she's still really sick, and there's a really good chance she's still going to pass away, but none of us could have imagined this happening to her, and she couldn't either.”

The patient—she's still a patient—asked my friend, “Does this mean that I have to bake all those sweet church ladies casseroles who were feeding me the last few months?” She said no.

She said, “What am I supposed to do now? I knew how the story was going to end, and I knew what the time frame was. How am I supposed to live now with this scan result? I was okay. I'd resigned myself to where it was going, and now it's not going there seemingly, and now I don't know how to live.”

Our friend didn't have any answers for her, just like the doctor didn't.

Besides that it might be worthwhile to...to sit in the possibilities of something brand new coming forth, to sit in the possibilities of a different kind of life springing forth, even as she is still very sick.

I don't think this story that we read in Genesis is primarily about Isaac. I don't even necessarily think it's about covenants being kept. I think this story is about an omnipotent God who hears our laughter and relishes surprising us.

A God who meets us where we lack imagination. A God who meets us where we are resigned to the status quo. A God who meets us when we are afraid to hope because hope is too risky. This text witnesses to a God for whom all things are possible.

It's about a hundred-year-old woman giving birth, but more than that, it's about there being a people who trust and believe that God can still do things that seem impossible.

The text closes with this beautiful question. “Who would have said to Abraham...who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?”

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I wonder what it is that is impossible for you this morning, or maybe the impossible thing that's in your orbit might not be exactly for you.

I wonder what it might be to, even through our laughter behind the veil of the tent, to still be present before God, to submit our lack of imagination, our resignation to the status quo, to even bring before the altar of God our fear and hopefulness.

Because I've seen that question answered over and over and over. Who would have ever said that that marriage would be mended? Who would have ever said that that child would get back on the right track? Who would have ever said that she would find sobriety?

Who would have ever said that that friendship would be reconciled? Who would have ever said that that job would actually bring some type of satisfaction? Who would have ever said that my faith could be resuscitated?

I wonder if the author of Genesis desires to help shape a people who believe that God is truly at work in the world, who believe it so much that even through their skepticism, they continue to show up, even through their fear they continue to step forward into the possibilities of the Divine. I wonder if that sort of thing keeps us in the hard thing when it feels impossible. I wonder if that thing will be the balm to our wounds when we need it to be and the wind to our back when we must be pushed forward.

I think that if there is a covenant to be kept on our end, it might be to hold that hope in the God of all the possibilities. It might be to believe that we worship a God who can bring forth things even through our laughter, beautiful and good and life-giving, startling even.

In due season the Lord will return. It's what the Lord said to Sarah and Abraham. In due season I will return to you, and you will bear a son.

I wonder what it would look like for us to do the work in the in between.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.