

## **SERMON JUNE 14 2020**

### **Laughter in the midst**



### **Genesis 18: 1-15**

I love this story – I love it’s humanness.

An ordinary day. Abraham reclining at the entrance of the tent under the trees. It’s hot in the middle of the day – he’s napping - He’s 99 years old!

Abraham and his family were nomads living in tents. They travelled with their grazing herds in the desert. The people who lived in the harsh deserts of Judea depended upon each other for survival. Bedouin hospitality in the Middle East is still very real.

So Imagine this old man of the desert rubbing his eyes and jumping up to greet three unexpected strangers. Picture him bowing low to his guests in greeting as he begs them to stay. What he offers is humble – a little water to wash their dusty feet, a little bread to refresh them for their journey.

Yet his hospitality is lavish – bread made of the finest flour, a calf young and tender and curds and milk. When he finally serves his visitors they enjoy an abundant feast!

Abraham is the perfect host – welcoming and gracious, attentive and generous. Everything is as it should have been when strangers come by. At one level this is ordinary life - this is simply desert hospitality.

But there is an edge here – a sense of tension and anticipation that something is about to happen. As the readers we know what Abraham does not know – the story opens with the words “the Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre”.

Who are these strangers who enjoy Abraham’s hospitality? \*

(2)

I am sure everyone in Abraham's household were curious to know who they were. Can't you see Sarah eaves-dropping through the flap of the tent? Her ears burning? According to custom she was not out there sitting with the men but she was certainly present.

And her guests would have known it when they asked

"Where is your wife Sarah?" And they knew she was listening when one of them promised, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

I love this story for its humanness - Hidden inside the tent Sarah gives herself away as she tries to stifle a laugh.



You see Sarah and Abraham have been struggling with a promise of God for years.

Twenty four years have passed since God promised Abraham *"I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."* (Genesis 12:2) It was on this promise that they had left the security of their homeland into the unknown. And this promise is based upon a child.

Shortly before our story in Chapter 17 when God said Sarah will bear him a son, Abraham rolled on the ground with laughter. "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" he spluttered. (Genesis 17:17)

Now in the tent Sarah laughs to herself "After I am worn out and my husband is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

Imagine then how it is for Sarah: She's heard this promise over and over. Imagine the hurt when nothing happened month after month. How disappointment turned to anger and how as menopause passed anger turned to bitter resignation. Sarah has long given up on the hope of God's promise.

(3)

And now? - Well it's ridiculous that an old woman like her should bear a child. It's funny! She stifles her laughter under her hand but her laughter is bitter and cynical. Over and over God renewed the promise yet Abraham and Sarah remained childless.

I began by saying I love this story for its humanness - I do but it is also painful and disturbing especially in these days. When have you been so disappointed? Perhaps it was personal. Perhaps it was to do with the world you find yourself in.



I remember as a young Christian being totally inspired by Martin Luther King Junior and his non-violent campaign for civil rights for Afro-Americans in the United States. He caught my imagination as he talked about the power of love not hate to bring about change in the world.

This past week I heard an interview with Martin Luther King's daughter about what is happening right now in America and I was reminded of his great "I have a dream speech" of 1963. He spoke then of how Afro-Americans one hundred years after being officially freed from slavery were "still not free". And amongst many matters, he talked of "the unspeakable horrors of police brutality". Has nothing changed?

His words rang out for me

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. ....*

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."*

*This is our hope. .... This is our faith... We will be free one day ....*

(4)

*When all of God's children black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

Yet still his children and grandchildren feel the weight of racism on their necks.

When I was a university student I had the opportunity to attend an indigenous affairs conference in Canberra. I was involved in a music project for indigenous students in Adelaide and my lecturer invited me to attend as her assistant. There I heard people like Charles Perkins pressing for land rights and justice and yes an end to deaths in custody. I remember travelling to Canberra in a bus with aboriginal elders from Ernabella in South Australia's north and young aboriginal people from Adelaide and the hope we had in our hearts.

These past weeks we have heard that indigenous people who are 3 percent of our population account for 29 % of those in jail and since the Royal Commission into aboriginal deaths little has changed – things may even be worse.

The vision and idealism and hope I carried as a young Christian person for justice and equality and which took me to West Timor in Indonesia came out of my faith in Jesus who proclaimed the Kingdom of God. But sometimes when I look around ... I am dismayed. Is it all worth it? What has been achieved?

These are confusing times. We have had bushfire and droughts. This week tensions between the pandemic and the pain of inequality and lifelong experiences of aboriginal discrimination clashed. This coming week is World Refugee Week and again more than 70 million people are displaced world wide including asylum seekers still on Nauru and Papua New Guinea.... And throughout this Covid-19 season closing the doors of the church for gathered worship has been a struggle with my understanding of ministry and hospitality especially when people are in grief.

Sometimes when we experience disappointment and life seems to bypass us – when we are hurt and when our hope and ideals turn to disillusionment - sometimes in grief it's hard to keep faith. I don't know about you but I can understand Sarah's cynical laugh because God's promises can seem impossible in the reality in which we live.

But as Sarah laughs, the word of the Lord comes again.

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Is anything too wonderful – too extraordinary for the Lord? It demands an answer.

If we answer "Yes, some things are too hard even for God" - then God is not God and we are indeed hopeless in this world and all is lost.

On the other hand If we answer "No,. There is nothing that is too hard – too extraordinary – for God", we need to be careful: Sarah was so afraid that she has offended the living God that she tried to cover it up: "I did not laugh" "O yes you did!"

(5)

And if we say that nothing is impossible to God then what can we do next but to let go and be open to God coming into our lives in unexpected ways. As Sarah and Abraham discovered in the midst of life's struggles and complexities when God keeps his promises "wild and crazy things can happen beyond our imagination .....

And if the answer is "nothing is too extraordinary for God" what can we do but to keep faithfully following the call of Jesus to be his witnesses and to do our bit to make our world as God intends for it? What can we do but trust in our God-given dreams as Martin Luther King did? Why? Because we have discovered that we are part of a much bigger and longer story - God's story.

Who knows what might happen as we offer hospitality to strangers .... and live out the kingdom of God .... and share our faith? Who knows what will happen when we stand up and speak truth to power and keep working for justice for our neighbours? Who knows what might happen even in lock-down and worship on-line?

We may not change and save the world - that's God's part – but we may humbly start with ourselves and we may make a difference to someone's life here and change something there for the better.

And if nothing is too difficult – too extraordinary - for God then we are held in God's hands in these difficult times and the possibilities are endless. Just imagine it: A ninety year old woman becomes pregnant and gives birth! That is something to really laugh out loud about!



Sarah called her son "Isaac" which means "He laughed" and every time she called him in for dinner she laughed at herself and she with joy and delight with God who despite her disbelief and skepticism kept a promise in the craziest way.

In all your living, may you be filled with hope and enjoy many surprises and laughter along the way.

Laurel Barr

14<sup>th</sup> June 2020

