

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, June 11, 2023
10am

Text: Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7 (NRSVUE)

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: A Child Promised to Abraham & Sarah (Laughter)

[prayer]

This week I learned about witness trees.¹ Have you heard of these special trees? A Witness Tree is a tree that was present during a major historical or cultural event. Witness trees exist worldwide; there are hundreds alone in the United States. They include a tree planted in the 1780s on George Washington's property at Mount Vernon, a willow oak that was present during the War of 1812, a sycamore that witnessed the Battle of Antietam, and the beautiful Yoshino cherry trees planted along the tidal basin in Washington D.C. – a gift from Japan in 1912.

Reading about these witness trees got me thinking about the oaks of Mamre (mam-rye) in our Scripture lesson. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, those trees witnessed the very beginnings of our faith traditions. They saw our ancestor Abraham setting a table for the Creator of the universe; he thought he was hosting three men, but in fact he was breaking bread with God Himself. The trees overheard God's bold prediction of a child, Sarah laughing under her breath, and the question that has sustained generations in faith ever since: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (v. 14)

While those trees are no longer standing, there is a holy site today in Hebron in the West Bank venerated by some as the "Oak of Abraham."² There stands a very old tree, estimated to be 5000 years old. It appears dead, except for a young shoot growing from its gnarled trunk. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa 11:1 NRSVUE).

[pause]

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witness_Trees

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oak_of_Mamre

The summer is a season of Ordinary Time in the life of the Church—a season in between the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, and Jesus’ birth, visited anew, at Advent. The lectionary texts for these weeks follow the family narratives of our ancestor in faith, Abraham. These narratives are part of Jesus’ family history. They are also our heritage as people who have been grafted onto God’s family tree through Christ. Even though this season is called Ordinary Time, the stories we will be exploring this summer are anything but ordinary. In these stories God shows up in ways that are surprising, transformative, joyful, reconciling, and unifying, using the ordinary things of our lives for radical transformation and love.

We begin with the story of God’s appearance to Abraham and Sarah. Neither realizes immediately that the three strangers passing by their encampment are in fact the LORD and two destroying angels, on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah. This is not the first time Abraham and God have spoken. In Genesis 12, the LORD spoke to Abraham (then Abram) for the first time, commanding him to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldeans and journey to Canaan, a land that will one day belong to his descendants. Abraham and Sarah were young and childless when they made that journey. Six chapters later they are much older, but still childless. Three times the LORD has promised Abraham a son through Sarah (cf. Gen 15, 17, 18). But now Abraham is one hundred years old, and Sarah is ninety – still barren and well past menopause. A child at her age is absurd; she laughs at the thought.

The Church has historically criticized Sarah’s laughter as the disdainful amusement of a faithless woman. Let’s just name that interpretation for what it is: Sexism. Even though Sarah does not possess a modern knowledge of human biology, she still knows the limits of her body; not only has her period stopped, but Abraham is no longer having sex with her. Her skepticism is a reasonable response.

And let us not forget that when God told Abraham he would have a son by Sarah, Abraham laughed, too. In chapter 17 we read that “Abraham threw himself down in worship before the Lord, but inside he was laughing in disbelief! ‘Me, be a father?’ he said in amusement” (v. 17, The Living Bible).

Sarah does not laugh to mock God. She laughs to protect herself from her disappointment. She has led a hard and lonely life: Uprooted from her home, always moving from place to place, at times manipulated and used by her

husband for political advantage (Remember Abraham's treatment of Sarah in Pharaoh's court in Genesis 12?).

In those days a woman's one consolation was children, but Sarah does not even have that. She has spent her life longing for a baby. This is not a sinful longing; Sarah's desire is righteous. And still, year after year, no child.

Have you ever longed for something, something truly good and beautiful, and still that longing has gone unmet? Disappointment like that can make us bitter. Sarah's only refuge from her disappointment is cynicism. She cloaks herself in it to protect herself from the pain of a broken heart.

Cynicism is a fashionable attitude these days. The use of the word has actually been rising in the last few decades. So often the only response I can muster to yet another disappointing evening news cycle full of hate and violence and conflict is a cynical cluck of my tongue and resigned shake of my head. My cynicism is oddly comforting; it insulates me from the sometimes-crushing despair of a world that feels like it is moving backwards, not forwards. We wear our cynicism like armor, trying to protect ourselves against the disappointments of this life. We think we are being wise and pragmatic. But while our cynicism may dull the pain of our broken hearts, it also makes it harder for us to experience the ordinary miracles God is performing every day.

When we think about the bitter reality of Sarah's situation, it changes how we read God's response to her laughter. Like the trees, God overhears Sarah's cynical chuckle. "Why is your wife laughing?" God asks Abraham. It's a genuine question! God is not angry at Sarah; God is curious. Didn't Abraham tell Sarah about the covenant God made with him years before? Doesn't she know what God said: "Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that – too many to count!"? (Gen 15:5, The Living Bible)

Sarah tries to deny her laughter. "I didn't laugh!" she protests. She is suddenly afraid of this stranger who can read her innermost thoughts. She feels vulnerable, and so she lies.

I love God's response: "Oh yes, you did laugh." Now it is God's turn to chuckle. Again, this is not mocking laughter. God does not laugh at Sarah; God laughs *with*

Sarah. God's laughter is the warm and gentle response of a God who delights in surprising His children. In God's laughter is the sound of grace.

Fast forward a year and we learn that God has done for Sarah exactly as He promised; he has given Abraham and her a son. They name him Isaac, which means 'laughter.' God transforms Sarah's cynical laughter into laughs of joy. "God has brought me laughter," Sarah says – literally "Laughter God has made me" (21:6).

Sarah could not hide her disappointment and cynicism from God, and neither can we. God sees our heartbreak and the ways we try to cope, try to protect ourselves from feeling our pain. We keep our faith small, attempting to spare ourselves the disappointment of another prayer apparently unanswered. Even so, God responds with grace. God blesses us even when we doubt. God whispers, "Is anything too wonderful for Me?" And then God shows us the wounds in his hands and his feet and his side as a reminder of just how wonderful God's love and grace is.

As followers of Jesus, we must resist the temptation to take refuge in cynicism. After all, we worship a God of miracles, not a God of the status quo. The God that gave Sarah a child in her old age is the same God that raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus' death and resurrection changes our perspective on what is possible. The resurrection encourages us to cultivate a faith that is big and bold, a faith that is grounded in wonder, a faith that is curious and hospitable, a faith that loves to be surprised, a faith that abides in the expectation of joy. We may not always get the miracle we pray for, but God promises to transform our mourning into dancing, our skepticism into faith, our cynical chuckles into delighted laughter. "Weeping may linger for the night, / but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5 NRSVUE).

Is anything truly too wonderful for our God?

You tell me, church.

Amen.