

The Next Laugh

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME

Sunday, November 1, 2015

Scripture: [Genesis 18:1–15](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

On a day like to day, when we are remembering so many, I always find myself wondering at the ways I see the light of those candles reflected back in the faces that are here. The way in which our generations give rise to one another. So, let's go back to the beginning.

This third week of our confirmation series, the youth are hearing of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah the great ancestors of our faith. Here's the first mention of a word in our scriptures that would come to define the whole congregational church movement, "covenant."

Yes, God makes a covenant with Abraham. A promise and more. He tells Abraham his offspring will be like the stars in the sky. And Abraham and Sarah set off to prepare a new life... and wait for a child. God tells them that their offspring will be like grains of sand they are so numerous.... and they wait for a child. God, well, God is kind of quiet while they have a bunch of adventures in strange lands, and try to avoid detection. And they wait for a child. They get fed up and Abraham has a child with Sarah's servant Hagar... a son called Ishmael. But well, that doesn't go so well... and the two of them leave... and well, quite honestly that's a story that's not going so well still to this day. And still Abraham and Sarah wait for a child. Until, one day. When Abraham is about to be 100... and Sarah about 90... things take a turn.

You see, three travelers pass by, except they're not really travelers.

Sermon

You have to love a scripture reading that essentially ends up in a "Did not!" / "Did too!" argument with God. I have been there, trust me. But before we get all into whether or not Sarah laughed, let's handle something important.

It's possible to wait so long for a blessing that waiting becomes your new normal. That's where Sarah and Abraham are at the start of this story. It's possible to wait so long, that you begin to think that the waiting is what you will be remembered for, rather than the blessing that is to come.

Recently, a group of business researchers ([The Nonprofit Leadership Development Deficit](#): yes, I read the fun stuff so you don't have to, folks) presented a study about leadership among all non-profits. They had, a decade ago, released a study predicting a massive shift coming to the leadership of all our nation's non-profit organizations. The boomers were headed out, the next generation was coming in. They wrote most recently to explain, as good scientists do, why none of these things had happened.

As we might expect, in some cases younger Boomer leaders looked at a bad economy and simply decided not to retire. But overwhelmingly, the researchers found that under stress from cultural change and economic organizations had given up the ability to train or identify leadership in their own employees at lower levels. Faced with a challenging outlook, they shifted to continue the status quo.

Church has always had these sorts of generational questions, too.

How do we become a community that doesn't keep the lights on, but keeps our lights shining, passing the light of lives like these [saints' candles] on? We prayed today in our communion that we would be blessed to be a blessing. That's the way of it right? Abraham and Sarah are blessed so that the whole world may know blessing through their offspring. And may know that nothing is too wonderful for God.

It has to be said that lots of churches, or good church people are waiting for a blessing. Are waiting for a promise to be fulfilled of God's goodness.

The prayer that I grew up with goes like this...

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

The Birth of Laughing

So, about that laugh. Sarah, so certain that her blessing has been lost to her, laughs. And let's celebrate this woman who could, essentially homeless and 90, waiting on a miracle she's sure isn't coming... laugh. In this country our most beloved and most well known Catholic is the comedian Stephen Colbert. He says, "It's almost autonomic that you can't laugh and be afraid." - Stephen Colbert

If you go to the Hebrew for our text today, you'll sometimes get a translation closer to "Sarah laughed within herself." It is bodily... so much so that here's the poetic translation: Sarah and Abraham laugh in their belly, or "womb-laugh". And so, when their son comes to be, he will be called Isaac, that is "laughter", or even, "God Laughs." God and Sarah, together, get the last laugh here.

One of the great Iona Community leaders, John Bell, says Sarah is the standard bearer for our mainline congregations... for she is a 90 year old woman who can laugh the next generation into being. We have some hilarious 90 year olds here in this congregation, let me tell you. I had lunch with them recently.

How do we pass these flames on? The light of our faith, our church, our lives? We laugh. We hold it all lightly as we pass it to the next generation. We could worry what they will do with it... sure. But I have to tell you, after a lot of looking around, I have found that there is nothing I can build. No program I can create other than passing a wondering faith on to others that will truly last.

In the weekly email, I offered that you could carry a little something with you today that reminded you of a saint in your life. Grab ahold of that now if you did. If not, here are these candles. Take them in. Each one of these people gave of themselves, lightly, easily, that you might know more light and life through their lives.

Friends, I'm here to tell you our ancestors built the church like a time machine, but they didn't build it so that we could come in here and go back in time, they built it so Jesus could travel to the *future*. So, here's my accidental Stewardship plug: I pledge my support to this church every year so that we can continue to carry each other's stories, and Jesus's story into that future... even though I have no idea what that will look like.

A colleague who knows how to get his tongue correctly in his cheek for moments like this, Quinn Caldwell^[1], says:

The reason you know anything about the faith is that once upon a time, somebody in the Jesus movement realized they needed to set up a system to pass the faith on to the future. They poured themselves into the resulting institution...

I'm not saying every committee meeting the church has ever held mattered; most of them didn't. I'm saying that all institutions are annoying, AND that the church is the one that brought your faith to you. So when you're feeling ground down by yours, right after you refuse to chair another task force, but before you decide to quit forever, just remember this: the work you're doing is at least as much for your grandkids as it is for you.

The work is work, but it is also laughing... and letting this next generation steer. Gifting with joy the next generation's moment to thrive and revel in the grand institution of this people that for thousands of years has wondered at the truth we have found... That nothing is too wonderful for God.

In the end, when Isaac is born... when the star that would give birth to all the stars and

saints to come had finally arrived, Sarah the 90 year old mother says this: “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”^[2] So may you hear, and may you laugh. Amen.

1. http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit_daily-devotional_for-the-institutionalized ↩
2. [Genesis 21:1-6](#) ↩