THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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June 18, 2023

*Too Wonderful* Genesis 18:1-15. 21:1-7

Although we are used to hearing Abraham and Sarah’s names together, most of the time, the story centers on Abraham. He is the one to whom God speaks. He is the one who is revered as the patriarch of the nation. Even as Christians, we trace our spiritual heritage back to him and say that we are a part of one of the *Abrahamic* religions.

Sarah, on the other hand, often functions as an adjunct, or an accessory whose main role seems to be to help move the story along. She is never the center of the narrative…until now, until here, in this morning’s reading. In this story, while still centering on Abraham in many ways, the action focuses on Sarah and her response. It focuses on how she finally learns that nothing is “too wonderful” for God, and like her, we are called to learn this—over and over again.

As we heard, Sarah responded to the news of her impending pregnancy with laughter. Indeed, her laughter has been the source of a lot of debate and interpretation. Many have said that she was “called out” and scolded for laughing. I do not know if I agree with that. However, I have only read one scholar who thought that whole exchange between Sarah and the divine visitor was comic.

As for me: I have always smiled when I read that part. I have always liked that Sarah was noticed—she who had not even come out of the tent to sit with the visitors as Abraham greeted and fed them. Sarah was not even part of the conversation until she was heard laughing.

There are at least two things to note about Sarah and her laughter.  First, in the last chapter, chapter seventeen, Abraham was told the same thing—that he really was going to be a father—Happy Father’s Day, Father Abraham!

His reaction was not just laughter, the Bible says: he “fell on his face and laughed” [Gen. 17:17]. This was a much stronger response—and a negative one at that. He greeted the news with what was more than *with* surprise. Falling to the ground laughing pretty much qualifies as hysterical laughing *at*—laughing *at*—such a foolish or outrageous idea.

Sarah, on the other hand, backed up her laughter with facts. What had once simply been about her infertility [11:30] was now more than that. As we are told in verse 18:11, *“it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women”*—which is a polite way of saying that she was past menopause.

In point of fact, twenty-five years had passed since the promise of offspring was first made to Abraham back in chapter twelve. Can anyone blame Sarah for a certain amount of incredulity of that promise by now? Yet the messenger does push back saying, *“Is anything to wonderful for the Lord?”*[18:14]

In chapter twenty-one we get the answer to that question, as *“The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said…* [and] *Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son”* [Gen 21:1, 2].

Notice which character is the subject here. Not Abraham, who had been promised to be the father of many nations for quite some time, but Sarah. *Sarah* is the one whom *“the Lord dealt with”* [21:1].

They named the child Isaac, which means “he laughed.” And Sarah, who laughed with surprise and doubt at the announcement just a few chapters earlier, laughs again, saying, *“God has brought laughter to me; everyone who hears will laugh with me”* [21:6].

This time, Sarah’s laugher is the laughter of surprise and *joy*, and I believe that this is how we are supposed to remember her: in the throes of laughter at the “too wonderful” God whose whole purpose is to bring joy and meaning into the lives of God’s beloved men and women—yes, women, too—and that is an important point for us to dwell on: *Sarah’s* life, *her* story.

For thousands of years, scholars, writers, and teachers of this text have centered on Abraham, but this is a story of God centering on Sarah. It was Sarah’s joy and amazement that is focused on. It is her laughter that we remember. Abraham already had Ishmael, and in chapter twenty-five, after Sarah dies in chapter 23, he will have more children with his new wife, Keturah. However, it is Sarah’s son, Isaac, who is the recipient of God’s covenant with Abraham.

Centering on Sarah, even for that brief moment, was counter-cultural in Abraham’s ancient patriarchal society. However, it was not counter to God and who God is. It was natural and blessed because our God is a God whose covenant extends beyond Abraham to and *through* Sarah and on to us.

And so, the question we must still ask ourselves is the same one the heavenly messenger asked Sarah all those centuries ago. Really, *is anything too wonderful for God?*—what do *you* think? And how will you act on this, how will we live this out?

Think about it: the Bible tells us that Abraham and Sarah were two unimportant people living in obscurity in a place called Haran…until God calls them out of that life to follow God into a new life, a new future. God calls them to leave everything behind, including Abraham’s father and family—everything he knows. God then leads them into a new country where they do not have any relatives or friends—no support but God. Through these two aliens, who become quite old as they trust and obey, God creates a new chapter in human history. It is a chapter that continues to unfold, even to this day.

And the way in which this is *our* story, too, is in that same question that Sarah was asked. And so we may (and should) be asking ourselves: to what wonderful thing is God calling *us*? What can *you* think of? What have *we* dreamed of together for our church, ourselves, our communities? Do we still trust that God really *is* wonderful? Do we still really believe that God still is deeply desirous of our well-being, and the continuation of the Spirit of goodness that we have experienced as a community of faith? Do we believe that God still wants to show the kind of compassion to others through us, through our lives?

The question is asked: Is *anything* too wonderful for God?

A few moments ago, I mentioned how it was counter-cultural for the story to turn toward Sarah, and to focus on her and what she was doing and thinking. As we all know, this has been true, in varying degrees, for women all over the world and for much of the last few thousand years.

At times, we have been revered, women that is, as holy mothers and sisters, but we have also been the objectified. We have been used as vessels for male desire and posterity. We have been denied the right to our own opinions, the right to owning property, even the right to autonomy over our own bodies.

We can point, and rightly so, to places like Afghanistan where the Taliban have reclaimed political power and have begun to relegate women back behind full-length burkas. We can, and should, protest the way girls are being denied education and are even being poisoned when they try to get an education. However, we should also recognize and protest the fact that at this moment in this country, white women in *this* country still earn only 87.7% of what men make. For Black and Hispanic women the inequality is even greater.

As a woman, I find myself deeply grateful for all that has happened in my lifetime that has changed the way that women are treated here in our country. Yesterday, for example, I listened to a story about the first American woman in space, Sally Ride, and how much she loved what she did. I was glad for her and all of the women and girls I have known for whom the world is much more open than it once was.

However, I also find myself pondering on what more is possible, and I find I need Sarah’s story even more than ever. I need to hear that heavenly messenger asking me, just as he asked Sarah, *“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”*

Sarah learned that the answer is a resounding “No!” And she laughed and named her son Isaac, which means, “he laughed.” She laughed out of pure joy, and a purified belief that indeed, nothing we can imagine or long for is too wonderful for God.

The question the messenger asked is one that every Christian in every age must ask. We must continue to ask that, too. What is more, I hope that we will also notice and rejoice when we find ourselves responding to what more God is doing in our midst with the laughter of surprise and gladness. I hope we will be gratified when we see God doing something wonderful among us—even if it is new and a little scary.

Most of all, I hope we will remember Sarah and the way God focused God’s love and joy on her. And I hope we will laugh with her and look to see what else God is doing.

May this be so. Amen.