

“Despair Unraveled Into Joy”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; June 7, 2020

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

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 have pleasure?” 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.”

...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; 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.”

I will never forget the night of November 6th, 2012. Javen and I, with countless others, had worked for more than a year to defeat the marriage amendment that was on the ballot in Minnesota. We had done so much as staff members in the faith department of the campaign: leading forums in church basements all over the state, helping with events that raised millions of dollars, getting up early for staff meetings and staying up late to lead phonebanks into the cold night hours. In the last week, we had basically occupied the University of Minnesota campus, teaching in classrooms, walking around with Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, storming the student dorms and disrupting cafeteria dinner on Election Day, to load young voters onto waiting busses. But with such exhaustive efforts, there was no guarantee how it would turn out. More than thirty states at that point had taken such measures, and every. single. state. had lost such fights to that point. Going into Election Day, the polling was too close to call on the amendment—we were in a virtual tie. We spent the whole election night party hoping for the best but prepared for the worst, even after all that work. It wasn't until the wee hours the next morning, when we were about to go home, that the cry went up and victory was declared. What we had dreamed and labored long for, yet feared to hope in too much lest we be disappointed, had actually come to pass. Goodness and reform *did* prevail, despite centuries of anti-queer laws and practices. “Is *anything* too wonderful for the Lord?”, we wondered.

Abraham and Sarah know even more what it is to live with fearful despair. At the time we see them in this Scripture reading, they have been wandering nomads for decades, ever since the disembodied voice

of God called them to go from all that they had ever known to a mystery that God would show them. They have heard the divine promises of a child for Sarah many times over, but it's been so untrue to this point that Abraham asked God to recognize the hired man Eliezer as his heir, and Sarah forced her servant Hagar to have a child with Abraham. Despite God's promise to make of them a great nation, Abraham laughed in disbelief earlier when God promised a child through Sarah, and now it's Sarah's turn to overhear these visiting strangers with bitter laughter. They have the audacity to suggest the impossible: that despite being barren her whole life, and now post-menopausal, with a husband a hundred years old (!), she would bear a child. The hope that Sarah may once have had is now dried up with cynicism. "After I have grown old...shall I have pleasure?" But the unusual visitors respond: "Is anything *too* wonderful for the Lord?" As the story continues, what Jesus later says to the disciples is true here also: "for God *all* things are possible."

It is of course not necessary to have a child in order to believe in God's goodness, but for Abraham and Sarah that's the form that the impossible takes. God unravels their hardened despair and resignation with the joy of a newborn child. Sarah the poet turns her earlier cynicism and doubt on its head. "God has brought laughter for me", Sarah says with wondrous disbelief. Where once she laughed in scorn and mockery at the impossible promise, here she names the child Yitzhak (or "Isaac"), meaning "he laughs". This child's birth seemed impossible—and under the same circumstances now we would *still* say that it was. But Abraham and Sarah's assumptions about God, and what is simply beyond the limit of the possible, have been expanded. We read that God "did for Sarah as [God] had promised"—God turns out to be reliable after all. The impossible has been born, has been realized, and so Sarah laughs. Walter Brueggemann writes that "Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained. The newness is sheer gift—underived, unwarranted."¹ In other words, as the visiting guests say, "Is *anything* too wonderful for God?"

In our own day, though, we might reasonably wonder if there *are* some things beyond the reach of God's intervention. How long does this country have to wait for Black Americans to be treated as equal to White Americans? Must there be an *endless* cycle of death by police, public outcry, then forgetfulness and policy inaction for Black and Brown people in the human family? Black bodies have been subject to police force going back for hundreds of years, ever since slave patrols began, even before this country was founded. Despite every form of nonviolent and violent protest proclaiming the equal humanity of Black people, mostly White bystanders have not yet risen up with equal vigor to say that pervasive racism must end. What else could it possibly take to unravel the knots of White supremacy and systemic inertia? Will the enactment of "all people are created equal" remain *forever* as barren as it was when the Declaration of Independence declared it so? And what about the other social transformations for which we wait, or the personal deliverance from sorrows that we long for? Is anything *too* wonderful for God?

This morning we gather as people of faith, caught between the despair of Sarah waiting for long-delayed hopes, and the impossible laughter of Isaac's birth. We are in the position of knowing the assurances of faith—that God will "wipe every tear from their eyes", that Jesus promises "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"—but without the evidence of liberation in our public life. We await God's appearing—not at the oaks of Mamre, but at the oaks of our own homes, and at the oaks of public life. We wait for despair to unravel into joy, for new heavens and a new earth as the Bible proclaims.

I want to believe, and by faith I can promise you, that laws, practices and hearts do change—I've seen it happen. We are not stuck with the idolatry of White supremacy forever. God makes promises, and God fulfills promises, even though it feels impossible. Yet the end of White supremacy will not arrive on the wings of inevitability, and White people especially are called into action to hasten the day. One of the

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in the *Interpretation* series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pg. 182.

things that's been notably different in the recent protests for Black lives, as compared to protests in the 1960s or even five years ago, is how many White people are participating and raising our voices. Even the largest corporations are declaring a once-radical statement: Black lives matter. White-bodied people and White-cultured institutions are starting to recognize that to be on the sidelines as mere observers is to be accomplices in the crimes of racial brutality. White silence equals violence. So as we await the divinely guaranteed transformation of pain into joy, we have work to do as caretakers of this arriving promise. We can increase our learning from people of color through podcasts and film, we can speak to family members and friends about why Black liberation matters, we can be on the lines of protest ourselves, or we can visibly support efforts for change through our donations and our voices. We can hasten to the acts of mercy, relief and proclamation that we see in Abraham and Sarah's hospitality, caring for strangers who bear the voice of God. As a predominantly White congregation in the mostly White suburb of Edina, this is how we show a public commitment to the equal humanity of Black lives. It demonstrates our faith that God can surprise us like Sarah and Abraham. God can unravel the inertia and despair of racism with unexpected joy and solidarity.

There's one story from this week that embodies a birth of such solidarity. Pastor Ingrid Rasmussen, from Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, [wrote on Facebook last Wednesday](#) what happened when Brian Dragonfly, an employee of the Native heritage center Migizi Communications next door, approached her on Tuesday:

Brian Dragonfly said that when he arrived to assess the situation, he found that the building was still burning. "I decided to capture the fire," he said, holding up his lantern. He wondered if Holy Trinity would tend the fire with MIGIZI until they could rebuild. He thought that the flame—the fire—might bring some comfort to his community.

In we went to the sanctuary. Brian set the lantern on the altar. I ran to find a candle. We shared the fire—and along with it the trauma of the preceding days, the conviction that not all that was destroyed is to be mourned, and the hope that this ashy moment in our neighborhood's life will be an opportunity for new life. MIGIZI shared on Facebook: "Despite the flames, we as a community burn brighter...We look forward to showing our resilience once again."

Later that day, Rasmussen writes, *"I returned to the flame in the sanctuary and decided that I needed to bring it home for the night. (I'm more than a little fire conscious right now.) I tended the flame [that] night; congregants will take over this sacred responsibility [going forward]."* By the grace of God, solidarity between the largely White congregation of Holy Trinity, and a neighboring community organization for people of color, has been born. Let us look for opportunities to do likewise, until joy and laughter are fully realized, and White supremacy is no longer. Because as we see time and time again, in fact *nothing* is too wonderful for God. Amen.