

A Lectionary 11 6.18.23

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7; Matthew 9:35-10:8

Focus Statement: God works in the unexpected and surprising.

Before we get into the texts, a note about the hymn we're going to sing after the sermon.

It's a new one, I think we've sung it once before, but the tune is familiar. I chose it not because it has a ton to do with the texts or the theme, but simply because I find it delightful.

Our hymnody has a decided lack of roly-poly references in it, here's our chance to sing about pill bugs. The third verse is especially great, listen to this list. "Earth is full of wit and wisdom: / penguin, platypus, and snail, / cactus, sea slug, oak, and algae, / from the microbe to the whale." How can you not love a song with penguins, platypuses, snails, and sea slugs! Like, did a three-year-old write this song? It's fantastic!

I picked this hymn because it is surprising and delightful and it points out the presence of God in all things weird and wonderful. Our readings for today are all about surprise and delight, but they don't start out that way. So for our start, let's drop in on Abram and Sarai, now Abraham and Sarah, and catch up on what's happened between last week and this week besides new names.

Last week when we were first introduced to the first couple of the Abrahamic traditions, they—well, he, Abraham—was being called by God to set out from everything he'd ever known and make a home for himself in a place God would show him. And in exchange for this bold move, God promised to make of him a great nation and bless him, so that through him all the families of the world shall be blessed. This was a big ask for a childless seventy-five-year-old, but Abraham went. I since that reading and this one, twenty-five years have

passed. In those twenty-five years, God twice renewed that covenant with Abram, the most recent renewal in chapter seventeen changing their names to Abraham and Sarah, Abraham meaning "Father of multitudes," but still no "multitudes" of children have been born.

Abraham had once son through Sarah's maidservant, we'll hear that story next week, but Sarah remained childless. So absurd was this promise of descendants becoming that when in chapter seventeen God again clarified it would be Sarah who would be the mother of many nations, Abraham, and I quote, this is Genesis chapter seventeen verse seventeen, "fell on his face and laughed, saying, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And God confirmed, I'm not forgetting about Ishmael, the son you have with Hagar will be blessed also, but this covenant is with Isaac, the son that Sarah will bear.

This gets us up to speed with today's reading, where we find Abraham sitting at the entrance of his tent enjoying the midday sun. When suddenly three men appeared in the distance. The reader knows the men to be the Lord, but Abraham didn't know that. Abraham's show of extensive hospitality was not because he knew it was the Lord he was greeting, but because hospitality was the sort of person Abraham was.

After this extensive show of promising a little bit of bread and whipping up a whole calf, the men got to talking and asked, "Where is your wife?" Abraham answered, "in the tent." In the tent means that Sarah was able to overhear this whole conversation that was about her but didn't include her. The men repeated to Abraham again God's promise, that Sarah would bear a son. Then we get to maybe my favorite utterly cringeworthy line, starting

with Abraham, as if to make this next comment more tactful. Pro tip writer of Genesis, if you have to find a more tactful way to say something, you maybe just shouldn't say anything, but anyway, here's the line. "But Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." This is possibly the most euphemistic way to say that Sarah is post-menopausal. Sarah heard this pronouncement of pregnancy and she, appropriately, laughed. Because the writer of Genesis may not have had any idea how fertility worked, but Sarah did. She knew this was an absurd claim. And here's something I just noticed for the first time this week, God chided Abraham, not Sarah, for her laughter. Like God was hinting, "Abraham, I told you what was going to happen here, did you not think it might be worth mentioning this to her? She had to overhear it through the tent flaps? Come on, bud! Get with the program!" Sarah tried to deny her laughter, but God confirmed, you did laugh.

Sarah laughed, and Sarah had a right to, because this statement was absurd. But just three chapters later we hear her laugh again, this time with joy. Sarah laughed, and everyone who hears will laugh with her, because her son Isaac was born. Isaac's name is even funny, a play on the word for laughter.

This is a bit of a dicey passage to preach on a parent holiday because parent holidays are complicated. And this story seems to gloss over the twenty-five years Sarah and Abraham waited and prayed and longed for a child, and then one just appears. Which, a) undercuts that first twenty-five years of suffering and b) fertility doesn't actually work that way. All things are possible with God yes, but that is not an answer for people who are hurting. So,

let's be clear, I'm not reading this as a story about pregnancy. I'm reading this as a story about laughter. About the many kinds and ways and reasons we laugh, and how God is in the middle of all of them. This story shows us that laughter is not always joyful. Laughter can just as much be a defense mechanism as tears, a way to make space in a world that feels hard or broken. Abraham laughed in scorn, God showed up and stood strong in God's promise. Sarah laughed defensively, because she had been the victim of too many false promises, God showed up and called out Abraham for not being clear in the promise. But then, on the flip side, there is the laughter of promise. Sarah eventually laughed in joy, and all laughed with her, and her child was named laughter, because the God who called them into the wilderness some twenty-five years ago and had been with them ever since, had said they would be a great nation, and that promise was being fulfilled in the most unexpected way imaginable. Not the way they would have chosen, certainly, but was still being fulfilled.

God keeps God's promises. Not in the way we expect, or in the timeline we plan, or the vision we might have had, but God figures it out. I've told this story before, but I was the last in my seminary class to get a call. It became a joke, because, like Sarah I had to laugh defensively at why I seemed to be so infinitely unemployable. And then you all came calling, and I got the job, and it was not where I expected to be at all, but it was this incredible mix of my skills and gifts in seminary and my work experience before. I was talking to my pastor the night before my ordination and I remarked, maybe this took so long because God wanted me to wait for this congregation. Wendy interrupted me. God did not make you wait for a call, things happen. Your struggles are not some divine learning

from God, God was with you in those struggles, putting back the pieces every time they fell through. I don't think there was some divine plan in Abraham and Sarah's twenty-five year wait for God's promise to be fulfilled. I think it took that long because it took that long, and God was with them in every false hope and heartbreak along that journey. Because with God's people in joy and sadness is who God is.

Dear people of God, the promise in these texts is there is always hope, there is always promise. Because the promise is that God is always with us, in every journey and struggle, in every dark place and random corner. Sometimes the hope is in time, sometimes the hope is the work God has placed in us. That's the Gospel text, after all. Jesus told the disciples to pray for laborers, and then sent them to be those laborers. There wasn't laughter mentioned, but that's where I imagine that laughter took place. Jesus sent them, and I imagine they were all, hang on there Jesus, we're the ones you asked to pray for laborers for the harvest, not the ones who should be laborers for the harvest. We're plenty happy right here watching you do it and praying that God will send other people. But that's how God works sometimes, maybe a lot of the times. There's an oft-quoted line attributed to Pope Francis, "We pray, and then we do something, that's how prayer works." Jesus told the disciples to pray for laborers, and then they ended up being the very laborers they had prayed for.

Sometimes we laugh because God sends us and we don't know we want to be, are able to be the ones God sends. And sometimes, as the hymn we are about to sing reminds us, it is in

the beautiful silliness of God's creation. Because a world of platypuses and penguins is a world worth believing in. Thanks be to God, who is with us in every sort of laughter. Amen.