

2nd Sunday after Pentecost (2020)
Genesis 18:1-15
Genesis 21:1-7

Several weeks ago, as I was previewing the suggested Bible readings for this summer, I noticed that all this summer, readings from the Book of Genesis are suggested. I was drawn to that because, it is in the Book of Genesis that we read about real people and their real lives and real problems. We started last week with a poem about God creating the earth and continue with the story of Abraham today. Throughout the summer, my plan is to work our way through the Book of Genesis.

A year ago, when I first came to Waupun and set up an appointment with a new doctor, he noticed a suspicious enlargement on my thyroid and scheduled me for an ultrasound. This was my first experience with ultrasound, but it has many uses, including evaluation of an unborn child. Some couples want to know the health and gender of their unborn child; some don't. Ultrasound is a way of finding out.

There was a time, not long ago, when determining the gender of your child was far from scientific. Old Aunt Hattie, for example, was convinced you could tell whether the happy couple was going to have a boy or a girl by the way the mother carried the baby. If it looked like the baby was resting low in the mother's womb, the child was said to be a boy. If the mother was carrying high, it was supposed to be a girl.

Grandma Marie, on the other hand, was convinced the gender could be determined by the mother's cravings. If the mom-to-be wanted sweets and chocolates, she was having a girl. If she wanted things that were sour, it was said the baby must be a boy.

Then the neighbors would chime in. They believed the key was with the father, not the mother. If he gained sympathy weight during the pregnancy, the baby was thought to be a girl. If he didn't, it was a boy. Maybe this is related to the previous thinking. A mom craving sweet might share them with her husband.

Another means of trying to determine the gender of a child seems a little more "magical." The mother, or a well-meaning friend or relative, would attach the mother's wedding ring or a needle to a piece of string and dangle it over her belly. If the ring started to move in a circle, the believers said the baby was a girl. If it swung back and forth, this meant it was a boy.

Sarah of the Bible didn't have ultrasound technology available to her. Yet as far as we know she was the first woman ever to know categorically the gender of her unborn child. She didn't dangle a needle over her belly or journal her cravings to determine the gender of her child. Whether they were angels or

whether it was the LORD Himself, she was told by one of the visitors that she would have a son.

The Bible tells us that Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac, the son predicted, was born and Sarah laughs that she is too old to have a child. It is easier for men to be fathers late in life than it is for women although the record for women giving birth in recent times are women in their 70's, children conceived by in vitro fertilization.

At first, Sarah is incredulous. I have heard of some older men thrilled to father a child at an older age. I know women who would still be happy to be pregnant at an older age – even at 103. When Sarah overhears the messengers of God telling her husband that she is going to have a baby, she laughs. Who could blame her? The thought of having a baby at her advanced age is absurd. She says herself that her husband is old and that she is well past her childbearing years.

The writers of the New Testament are far less polite with their assessments. The author of Hebrews writes that Abraham was so old that he was "as good as dead." In his letter to the Romans, Paul says the same thing about Abraham, then additionally states that Sarah's womb was also dead. Harsh.

This isn't a story about what is possible through science. Nor is it a story about aging well. This is a story about faith and trust and hope in the LORD.

Let's try a little experiment. Close your eyes and empty your mind of every other thought. Okay, now, picture God. You can open your eyes now. What was the first image that came to mind? I'll bet, for most of us, it was an old man with a white beard.

Now let me ask you this. In your mental image, was God smiling? My guess is you pictured God without a smile. "Stern" might be a good word to describe the face of the Almighty.

Now, one further question: in your mind's eye, was God holding anything? If you answered, "a thunderbolt," congratulations -- you've just selected most people's all-time favorite accessory to the divine wardrobe.

Why is it so many of us picture the Lord of heaven and earth as a grumpy old man packing a loaded thunderbolt? We imagine God that way, even though we know better. Sure, God can get angry. There's ample evidence of that in the Bible. Yet the Bible also teaches that "God is love" -- and that God "so loved the world" that we have received as a gift "God's only son," that we might "not perish, but have everlasting life."

Why is it, then, that we so quickly forget these passages, and focus instead on a God of wrath and destruction – a God out to get us? Remember, after hearing of God's miraculous plans, Sarah laughed. Whether it was because of disbelief or hopeful joy, Sarah laughed.

Last week we heard about a God who created all things above the earth, on the earth and in the waters. This week, we hear about a God who is having an argument with an 89-year-old woman and they sound like grade schoolers.

“Why did Sarah laugh”, the LORD asks?

Sarah denied it saying, “I didn’t laugh!”

“No, you did laugh.”

“Did not”.

“Did too.”

“Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”

The story of the conception and birth of Isaac is not just the story of a child for Abraham and Sarah – a child-dream which they had long given up on. It is the story about the love and faithfulness of God and the lengths to which God is willing to go to bless us.

As human beings we get to choose how we view the world around us. Do we get up in the morning and go through our day with a hope and excitement and expectation of God’s blessings right around the corner. Do we celebrate the grace in the adventures of life? Is our glass half-empty or half-full? Is the best truly yet to come?

Against all hope, as Paul writes in Romans 4, against reason, against what they could do themselves, Abraham and Sarah believed that God had something good in store for them. They had hope for a new future God was promising.

It is pretty easy at times to trust only in what we can see, even when that is incredibly unreliable. Many of us have been there. We have come to the end of our resources, the end of our ability to understand what is happening in our lives.

+ Some have received a diagnosis they have no idea what to do with.

+ Others have been called into their supervisor's office and been told they no longer have a job.

+ Others have had someone whom they care deeply about hurt or disappoint them.

+ Some of us have been exactly where Abraham and Sarah were, desperately wanting to be parents and hearing that having a child is not likely to happen -- at least without the help of technology and at great expense.

+ Some people experience broken relationships or an injury or illness or death of a loved one.

We have fallen into those times when all we can see in front of us is struggle, hardship, disappointment and denial. The darkness seems thick and we're convinced there is no light at the end of the tunnel, except from the train that will soon run us over.

This can also happen to our communities. In a world where bad news travels fast, we can become convinced that our neighborhood, nation, world, or

church is doomed. Perhaps you, or perhaps you have heard someone say, that things are worse now than they have ever been, the world is going to hell in a handbasket, and the last days are now upon us. We look at the situation and see no solutions except bad ones.

And yet, trust and hope in the LORD allows us to see beyond what is right in front of us. Through the eyes of faith, we see God and God's promises of blessing even when they seem impossible or absurd. We firmly believe that God has not left us to figure it out on our own. Instead, our ultrasound faith allows us to believe -- sometimes against all hope -- that God is working out blessing in our lives and in the world.

- + When the diagnosis comes, ultrasound faith gives us the strength to face the illness, knowing we are in God's hands through it all.

- + When our job is taken, ultrasound faith gives us the courage to send out resumes believing that God has something better for us.

- + When the relationship appears beyond reconciliation, ultrasound faith gives us the patience to wait, trust and pray for God to soften the heart of the other, or for the humility to ask for forgiveness, or for the hope of a new, healing and promising relationship.

- + When some are told they might never be able to have a baby, ultrasound faith opens our eyes to new possibilities of becoming parents.

- + When all we see of the world is darkness, problems and pain, ultrasound faith calls us to reach out to those in need. It is ultrasound faith that sends us into the world to bring change and the light of hope to others.

It is ultrasound faith that gives us the boldness to believe we can minister to the hungry and homeless in ways that will change our neighborhoods.

It is ultrasound faith that sends us out to repair homes, provide healthcare and build schools.

It is ultrasound faith that brings the people of God together for worship, to be a Church of light and hope for God's presence into the future, believing that God will bless us, so that God might then change the world through us.

Abraham and Sarah laughed at the idea that God might bless them in their advanced age with the gift of a child. Their ultrasound faith, however, allowed them to believe something better. They believed God's promise, and they could see the blessing that was to come for them and the whole world.

Today's story from Genesis is not just a story of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, it is a story of God's love for the whole world, because it is through Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, down through the generations, that a Savior is born, who offers the hope and promise of forgiveness and salvation for all people that God so desires. God's promise began there and we continue to reap the blessings. A father at 100? A mother at 89? Absurd! Unbelievable! Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?!