



MYERS PARK  
BAPTIST  
CHURCH

A faith community  
on a journey seeking  
a welcoming, loving,  
and just world.

## “AUDACIOUS PROMISES”

Delivered by Reverend Dr Tim Moore

Genesis 18:1-3, 9-15; 21:5-7

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Third Sunday after Pentecost

God’s blessing of Abraham was a promise. Last week, we read that God will make him a great name, make him a great nation—future things. A promise. In biblical times, nations were tribal. So, you couldn’t be a nation unless you had children. And Sarah was barren. Fast forward to our passage today. God is going to make good on the promise.

This is an old story and one that’s been worked over a bit. It begins by saying that the LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. But when Abraham looks up it’s three messengers, not the LORD, who are there. Some in ancient Israel believed it was impossible to see God—that you would die if you saw God. Some scribe along hundreds of years of recopying this story must have believed that and changed the story—however he wasn’t a very good proofreader because the story flips back and forth between the three messengers and the LORD.

The messengers ask Abraham where Sarah is. When he tells them she’s over in the tent, they decide it’s time to tell him a secret. They tell Abraham, not Sarah, though the news is about her body. He is the patriarch after all and owns her body. **But postmenopausal Sarah overhears them tell Abraham that when they return next year, she will have a son. She laughs at this audacious promise.**

Let’s take a time out for a moment and talk about what happened between chapter 12 in last week’s reading and this passage in chapter 18. The lectionary skipped over a lot of important pieces to the story. Sarah and Abraham are getting older, decades go by and no child is born to them. Now, **don’t get caught up by their ages** in these stories. It’s just a storyteller’s way of making it crystal clear that Sarah was way too old to have a baby, that this was a miracle that could only happen through God. **This is theological history, not factual history.**

**Sometimes promises can become a burden.** And for Sarah the failure to bear a child became unbearable. At the beginning of chapter 16, she tells Abraham **to use** her Egyptian slave-girl and perhaps Abraham and Sarah will have a child through her. Notice that Sarah does not mention Hagar by name, she is just an instrument to be used. And notice that Sarah claims that the child born to her Egyptian slave-girl will belong to her, not to Hagar. Sarah makes the plan. Abraham obeys. Phyllis Trible suggests that the writer of this story also wrote the Eve and Adam story and she follows a similar plot [Trible, *Hagar, Sarah*, p 38].

God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son. **However, God lingered on fulfilling the promise and they gave up waiting for God.** The promise became a burden to carry, so they decided to make a Plan B. And this is the key to understanding the story: Out of shame, or fear, or disillusionment, or just the sense that they were not enough, they forced their own way. Hagar didn't have a choice; she's the first surrogate in the Bible, but it wasn't something she chose.

Ishmael is born. His name means "God hears." But God doesn't seem pleased with Sarah and Abraham's Plan B. In chapter 17, God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a son. In that version, it's Abraham who laughs. And then he pleads with God, "Oh that Ishmael might be acceptable to you." God has other plans for Ishmael, God keeps promises and Sarah will have a child. When he is born, God named him Isaac, **which means laughter.**

What are your stories of promise? Of promises made to you? Or made about you, of some potential you are destined to claim? The promise made to Abraham and Sarah was a blessing and a burden. Perhaps that's been your experience as well. What about the stories of promise to this church? Have they been both blessing and burden?

Over the past 20 years, Brene Brown has been studying shame and vulnerability and the way they impact our lives and leadership in organizations. **Stories of promise repeatedly come through in her books and the way they can put great pressure on us to perform, to achieve, to be good enough.** There's the child prodigy that clearly has a talent for musical expression and quickly masters instruments, but who ultimately feels trapped by this all-encompassing calling. And when she "only" rises to the level of mid-size city symphony and not Carnegie Hall, she feels like a failure.

There's the wife, who with the support of her spouse, quits her job while they took out a second mortgage and she began an online clothing store—the dream of her life and career. Everyone always said she should be in fashion, and this was her chance. And things got off to an amazing start, but while she had a great sense of fashion, she didn't have such a handle on management. After a few years, it went bankrupt and she closed it down. Now, she works in a job she hates, and they have the debt of the second mortgage to still pay off. Worse, she's ashamed she failed.

Abraham and Sarah's story in one sense seems out of this world and unrelatable, but in another sense they are like everyone who has a dream or is told they have so much potential and promise. Stories of promise start off like a blessing, like an affirmation of you are, a hope that one day your life will be better, but they can also turn into burdens that weigh us down.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 to deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, he began by talking about the audacious promise of this nation. "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence," he said, **"they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.**

**This note was the promise that all [people], yes, [Blacks] as well as [Whites],** would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . . And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice. . . .”

“So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in **the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed**—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [persons] are created equal.”

**Great promises**, such as the ideals of this nation or the biblical claim that the Kingdom of God is near, **may be lived TOWARDS more than they are lived OUT.** Meaning that they may never be fully realized in this mortal plane where human fallibilities such as greed, envy, and hatred work their way into human endeavors. But to be a great nation, to be a people of faith living towards these ideals is a measurement of our faith and of our commitment to democracy. King used to quote a 19th century abolitionist minister who preached, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Living towards these ideals, however, over this long arc of history can be frustrating. It may feel like taking two steps forward and one step back. And it's one thing to be an abolitionist preacher frustrated by the slow arc of justice; it's another to be an enslaved person trapped in bonds they cannot break by themselves. **We will celebrate Juneteenth this Friday, not just to remember the liberation of enslaved people in our country, but to also keep living towards the audacious promises of our nation.**

When George Heaton preached his last sermon at Myers Park on a dream possessed, he didn't define the dream. In fact, he said very clearly the dream was not the buildings or programs or ministries of this church, nor the institution itself. The dream is God's. And the dream is a story of promise. Heaton said, “If we are possessed of it, we shall be always moved by that dream so that there shall be no place where we stop or tarry”—now listen to this carefully—“to fashion in permanent form something which must forever change” [*By a Dream Possessed*, p 56]. If Heaton, whose name this hall bears, has a truth to say to us 70 years later, it is that God's stories of promise are always focused on the future, not in glorifying the past.

**It was 60 years ago that this church approved a resolution that it would be “open to all, closed to none.”** And that commitment has taken us down many paths. There is no way in the middle of the Civil Rights movement that the members of this congregation could have imagined the way that phrase would be transformative in the decades that followed and in the ways that this promise is still struggling to be fulfilled.

If we nostalgically look back to some golden age in this church's past with the desire to return to those days, or with some shame that today we are a different congregation, there is no way we can live into the promise God still has for Myers Park Baptist Church. We can't go back to 1966, or 1986, or 2006. And here's the thing, God doesn't need us to.

For instance, this congregation was courageous when it invited Carter Hayward to preach here in 1979 just after she came out as a lesbian. But today, she is a world-renowned theologian and hundreds of churches would love for her to grace their pulpit as she did again this spring—with of course absolutely no controversy at all.

There are churches that were too scared, or too blind, to do what this church did in those days, but now that a runway has been paved for them by churches like this, they don't have to be so courageous and today, they can do what Myers Park did 60 years ago or 40 years ago or 20 years ago. The question for us is how do we live out our story of promise today, the dream possessed, for the living of these days, not yesterday, but these days?

Both Sarah and Abraham laughed at God's audacious promise to them. God then told them to name the child Isaac, which means laughter. So, that every day they hug the boy, read him a book, teach him a skill, they remember God is laughing with them. So, that they would never forget God kept this audacious promise.

And God is still working to keep audacious promises. Does that mean every story has a happy ending? Of course not. Hate and greed, fear and envy still get in the way. But it means that God is not giving up on you, or this church, or this nation. God is still working to help you authentically be yourself, to be who you are not who someone wants you to be. Still working to help this church live out its dream for today, not for yesterday, but for today. Still working to help this nation live up to its ideals—that all persons are created equal and they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

May one day, one day, we laugh with God. AMEN.