

INTRODUCTION: The Bible is filled with different kinds of literature: from the poetry of Psalms and Song of Solomon, to the Wisdom literature of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, to the Narratives of the Gospels, the Letters of the Apostle Paul, and more.

We do not think of the Bible as including romance, per se, but I like to think that the Bible is God's love letter to us. That's right, the Bible is nothing, if it is not a love story--the ultimate love story--of God's love for the world, and specifically for you and me.

Within this BIG, overarching story, are countless little love stories. During Advent this year we are going to focus on four different couples, and how God's love is expressed to us, through them! Thus, a Legacy of Love! Today we begin with Abraham and Sarah.

#### Genesis 12:1-5

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup>"I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

<sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the LORD had told him;... Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. <sup>5</sup>He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

#### Genesis 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup>Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

<sup>3</sup>He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by.

<sup>4</sup>Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. <sup>5</sup>Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

“Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.”

<sup>6</sup>So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three measures (seahs) of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”

<sup>7</sup>Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

<sup>9</sup>“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him.

“There, in the tent,” he said.

<sup>10</sup>Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

<sup>11</sup>Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup>So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

<sup>13</sup>Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ <sup>14</sup>Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

<sup>15</sup>Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

Genesis 21: 1-6

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. <sup>2</sup>Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. <sup>3</sup>Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him....<sup>5</sup>Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac was born....<sup>6</sup>Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.”

[PRAY]

This couple were simply living their lives when they have an encounter with the Living God. Forever after, their lives—and ours--will never be the same.

This is a story of a faith journey: This previously unknown God shows up and makes Abraham an offer he simply cannot refuse: he is promised land (12:1), descendants (12:2), and a blessing (12:3) through which the entire world would also be blessed! That's a powerful three-fold promise!

Abe packed up his belongings, his family—wife, nephew, and servants—his livestock, and left. The writer of Hebrews says: “he went out not knowing where he was to go”. No AAA "trip tick". No Google map or GPS coordinates to guide him. Abe literally, pulled up stakes and left all that was familiar, on the promise of an untested, untried, and largely unknown God. Nonetheless, Abraham embraced the call of God!

The journey of faith and the road of mutual trust is neither straight nor smooth. For both Yahweh and Abraham there are obstacles to overcome and tests to be endured. While the "roll call of faith" in Hebrews 11 upholds Abraham and Sarah as paragons of faith, the reality is considerably more nuanced; Abraham and Sarah make some questionable choices. To put a finer point on it, they were far from perfect! For instance, in an effort to save his own hide, he passes off his stunningly beautiful wife, as his sister—more than once! (She ends up in the harem of Pharaoh (Ch 12) and later, King Abimelech (ch 20)!) This is just some of many examples. (Abraham’s story is in Genesis 12-25—I encourage you to read it for yourself.)

The Bible does not sanitize our heroes of faith or whitewash the truth. Rather it tells it like it is—that God uses flawed, broken people who were a mixture of faith and doubt, good and bad, success and failure.

Relative to the repeated promise of a son, the years roll by like empty strollers. Sarah's biological clock is ticking. No baby. “Barrenness” or infertility persists.

Feeling as if they are left to their own devices to resolve this matter, and later Sarah offers her servant Hagar as a surrogate, who gives birth to Ishmael. While this was a culturally acceptable alternative to establish an heir, it was NOT the fulfillment of God's promise. They were human attempts to realize God's promises by manipulating the people and circumstances for the desired outcome. Not only did these actions result in more heartache for everyone involved, they were failures of faith.

How often have you and I been in similar situations? We have prayed and prayed for a desired outcome, that we believe in compliance with God’s will. Lacking the patience to wait for God to act, we instead preempt God’s actions through actions of our own, and in doing so, settle for less than God’s best. I can say from personal experience, when I have done so, things did not end well.

Perhaps the (time) delay between the promise and its fulfillment provides fertile soil in which God can grow the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The delay may be part of God's plan to grow their faith (and ours), to increase their patience (and ours), to make the fulfillment of the promise truly an act of God! *At least as important as the thing we wait for, is what we become, as we wait. Faith and godly character are forged in the delay, as well as a hilarious sense of humor! (idea from Ben Patterson, Keep on Laughing)*

**God had renewed the promise of offspring to Abraham as part of solemnizing the covenant with him. (Genesis 17:15-17 NIV)**

*<sup>15</sup>God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife.... <sup>16</sup>I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."*

*<sup>17</sup>Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"*

The implication is that Abraham "fell down" as an act of worship, but he was also doubled over with laughter!

When was the last time we had a really good laugh during worship??

In Chapter 18, Abraham and Sarah offer hospitality to three strangers who seem to appear out of nowhere. One, identified as "the LORD" (v1) inquires about Sarah, and renews the promise of a son (v.10) Sarah, eavesdropping on the conversation.

Upon hearing this, she begins to laugh.

Was it the laughter of cynicism or despair? Perhaps a bitter chuckle.

I wonder if it began as a gasp or a giggle, or a snicker that evolved into a gut-wrenching belly laugh. Perhaps she even laughed until tears ran down her cheeks. Do you remember the last time you laughed like that??

Why did Abraham and Sarah laugh?? They laughed at the absurdity of a baby being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare picking up the tab! (F. Buechner)

**It is the laughter of disbelief!** (No late-night comedian could write a story any funnier.)

God rebuked Sarah for her doubt, so she lied and denied: "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes you did laugh." (Genesis 18:10-15)

***Friends, this is holy hilarity at its best!!***

Sarah doubted and denied, laughed and lied because she was afraid. What if God really could and really would fulfill her heart's desire for a son? Now? In her 90's?? (If she doesn't laugh, she'll cry!)

Don't laugh, dear friends...Do you know what this means?

This means God is not finished with you or me! God has more for us...God can bring new life to us, yes, even in our 90's!!

When God says to her, ***"Is anything too hard for the LORD?"*** it is an invitation for her to have a really good laugh and allow surprise back into her life. The invitation to us is the same.

Is anything too hard for God?

Think for a moment about YOUR impossible situation, the one that keeps you awake at night...the one that is most often in your prayers....

What would it really mean if God got involved and acted in that situation? What would happen if hardened hearts, softened? What would happen if minds and attitudes changed?

Do we really believe that God can do the impossible?

If we really believe that God can DO the impossible, then *we can no longer be content with "business as usual"*. If we really believe God can do the impossible, then...uh oh: **Our lives will never be the same!**

Why? Because the call of God to Abraham and Sarah, is also a call to us.

It is a call to move beyond three very powerful, deep seated human fears:\*

**Fear of the unknown.** God's call is always an invitation to trust and obey.

No road map is given. Nothing but the promise of God to be present with us on the journey. Is that enough? It was for Abraham and Sarah. It was for the disciples who would later follow Jesus. Is it enough for you and for me?

**Fear of those who are different from us.** Uh oh...really? In calling us into new territory, God likely calls us into new relationships... welcome the stranger...to become vulnerable with those who are different than we are, and that can be uncomfortable. **God's call is likely to take us out of our comfort zone!**

**Fear of powerlessness. It is a call to surrender to God's leading and God's plan. It is a call** that requires us to walk by faith and not by sight...that I/we wait upon the Lord, in humility and dependence. God's call is a **call to the deepest trust we can imagine.** \* (Dan Clendenen, Journey with Jesus.)

What might the call of God entail for you? For me? For Calvary in the year ahead? Where might God be calling us to get involved, and with whom? I invite you to pray with me about these important questions.

**God has the last laugh.** Sarah- now in her 90s--delivers the promised son and names him Isaac, which means "Laughter". This one is the son of promise, who will inherit the land; this son will be named in Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:2). Sarah says: "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." (Genesis 21:6)

The Lord was gracious to Sarah and Abraham. God fulfilled His promises and acted in their personal history despite doubts and denials and delays. Their story--a crucial link in salvation history—is a reminder to us that God uses the messy, broken lives of ordinary people, complete with faults, failures, and yes, faith. God "does some of his best work, using the most unlikely people." (E. Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, p. 141)

Remember the 3-fold promise God gave to Abraham?

Land—Descendants—and blessing. The blessing was not for themselves alone but for the entire world! We are inheritors of this promise too—

This legacy of laughter and love is ours through the Birth of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Abraham and Sarah's love story reminds us that God is able to act in the most hopeless of situations; that indeed, nothing is too hard for God! The writer of Hebrews says when they were "as good as dead", new life was born.

After all, resurrection is God's specialty.

Is anything too hard for God?

[Pray]