

6-14-26 Sermon  
Genesis 18.1-15; 21.1-7

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Thus begins the eleventh chapter of the Book of Hebrews, that great litany of those who exemplified that kind of faith and who are held up as those worthy of imitation. Abraham’s story occupies a third of that chapter, beginning with the story we heard last week when God calls Abraham to “go.” To leave everything that is familiar and safe, the source of his wealth and security, and head out for parts unknown. Abraham receives a series of promises from the God who sends him forth: “I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you; I will make your name great; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” As Mark reminded us last week – we are blessed to be a blessing. Abraham and Sarah set out, and paused for a while in the land of Canaan. The LORD appeared to Abraham there, at the oak of Moreh, and promised him that his descendants would be given the land in which he stood.

Fast forward six chapters and many years, and we find Abraham under another oak tree, the oak of Mamre, and the LORD appears to him again. The text says Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. “He looked up...” When I read those three words this week, I wondered what he’d been looking at before he looked up. I picture him looking down, lost in thought. It’s too hot to do anything, so he’s just sitting, thinking. What’s he thinking about, I wonder? He’s not looking down in the way we have become accustomed to looking down. He’s not looking down at his cellphone, where the whole world lies literally at his fingertips. Where he could ask Siri what “mamre” means. Or use Chat GPT to calculate how long he can graze his flocks here before needing to move on. Or check the Weather app to see if there’s any rain in the forecast. Or check out the “What’s happening Canaan County” Facebook group. Or play that game he swore he was going to delete from his phone, but he’s so close to defeating the Boss monster. Just one more go! No, I suspect Abraham was looking down in the way we used to look down. Not at our phones, but at our *empty* hands. Lost in thought. Serious thought. Thoughts about finances. Family. Future. Perhaps even faith. Maybe about *losing* faith. About the futility of continuing to believe the promises of God. Because they must seem like a joke at this point in Abraham’s life.

The Lectionary can be a gift, in many ways. It gives us four options for a text to focus on each week. Or the option of wrestling with all four texts, and how they tie together, as Mark did last week. They invite us to consider texts that are often overlooked, or avoided by preachers, and every three years we return to these same texts to see if there’s a fresh word for us in these ancient scriptures. But the Lectionary is also *limiting* because of that. It can’t include everything, so there are texts we *won’t* hear. Sometimes those texts are important to understand the ones we’ve been given. Which is the case this week.

By jumping from chapter twelve of Genesis to chapter eighteen we miss another promise that God makes to Abraham. The LORD appears to Abraham again, and Abraham complains that as God has not given he and Sarah a child, he has had to make one of his household *slaves* his heir. God tells him, “No, you will have a son. *He* will be your heir.” Then God takes Abraham out of his tent and shows him the night sky – “see those stars without number? So shall your descendants be.” But time passes. And passes. And still no son. So, Sarah tells Abraham that, “as *the LORD* has prevented me from bearing children, go into my Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar. Maybe I will obtain a child through her.” Abraham does, and Ishmael is born, and instantly Sarah regrets her decision. A story we will explore together next week.

More years pass, and still no son for Sarah. When Abraham is 99 years old, the LORD appears to him again, and once again promises him descendants innumerable. This time Abraham asks the LORD, “Why can’t Ishmael be the one?” “No. your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac, and that will happen a year from now.” And then we read this morning’s text. Abraham, looking down. Not doomscrolling, but lost in thought. Although sometimes being lost in thought is much *like* doomscrolling, if we’re lost in thoughts driven by fear. Or despair. Or loneliness. If we’re worried, or anxious, as I imagine some of us might be at the moment, for all kinds of reasons. From the profoundly personal to the overwhelming universal. Concerned about the state of our life. The state of our nation. The state of the world. And looking *down* at our cell phone often only exacerbates those concerns. Or we look *down* at whatever it is we *do* on our phones to *distract* us from our concerns. Even if just for the time it takes to do Wordle that day. Who knows what Abraham was looking down at. Maybe his hands. Hands he barely recognizes, with their wrinkles and prominent veins. The signs that he *is* an old man. Long past possibility. Long past hope.

But then he looks up.

Before him stand three men. Men he apparently hadn’t heard approach him, perhaps because he *was* deeply lost in his thoughts. Or perhaps because these are no ordinary men. In a flurry of activity Abraham greets them and then offers them hospitality. Extravagant hospitality. Not the typical nomadic fare of milk and curds and jerky. No, he orders a servant to cull a calf and serves them barbecue! While they eat, Abraham stands next to them in the shade of the oak, watching, and then the men repeat the promise that the LORD had made to him the last time they met. Sarah, listening in from the tent entrance behind them, laughs to herself. Well past child-bearing age, I wonder if it was a bitter, self-mocking laugh. The LORD says, “Why did Sarah laugh just now? Is anything too wonderful – impossible – for the LORD? I will return to you in due season, and Sarah will have a son.” Sarah tries to deny it – “I didn’t laugh,” for she was afraid. The LORD said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

And that’s how that story ends. Almost comically! Then the Lectionary fast forwards again, three chapters this time, and we hear these words at the beginning of chapter 21: “The LORD dealt with Sarah as God has said, and the LORD did for Sarah as God had promised.”

Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Promise kept. Covenant fulfilled. Just not in the way they had dreamed or wanted. Even, perhaps, despite their best efforts to do it for themselves. Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me. Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?” (Which begs the question, “Yeah, *who* would have ever *said* that?”) “Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” “By faith,” the author of the Book of Hebrews says, “Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because Abraham considered God faithful who had promised.” At first glance, that appears to be a little revisionist history, based on all we’ve just heard! Even perhaps, hagiography. Because the story in Genesis suggests that Abraham and Sarah hardly receive the news that one day they *will* have a son with receptive hopefulness! More like resistant hopelessness. God’s promise is laughable indeed. And yes, impossible. And yet – even though Abraham and Sarah may have despaired of ever having a child. Even when it’s got to the point of being literally laughable, apparently, God’s promise is not dependent on the readiness of Abraham and Sarah to accept it. Apparently, God will keep God’s own counsel and will work God’s own will. It *will* happen – if not with people who have a ready faith, then at least in the context of fearful, resistant laughter. And that is the good news I find in these stories this morning. Because I confess I struggle to believe the promises of God on a regular basis. “Behold, I am making all things new!” “Really? It sure looks like a whole lot of the same old pain and suffering right now.” “God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear?” “Really?” So maybe the author of the Book of Hebrews was not engaging in hagiography, trying to gloss over the missteps and failures of Abraham. Maybe the models of faith we find in chapter eleven are just like us. Perhaps trying to make it all happen on our own. Laughing at the ridiculousness of saying, “Nothing is impossible for God,” when we’ve prayed and prayed for good people. People we love. And our prayers weren’t answered in the way we wanted. In the way we *needed* them to be.

Yesterday, as I worked on this sermon, I found myself thinking about someone Maggie and I met in Palestine three years ago. Dr Abdelfattah Abusrour is the founding Director of the Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society in the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem. For thirty years he has helped young people find ways to express themselves through the arts, providing a welcoming and safe community centre for them to gather. When our musician friend Martyn Joseph first met Dr Abusrour and heard of the challenges the youth of the Aida refugee camp face in their daily lives, including his own young children, Martyn asked him, “How do you keep going? How do you not fall into despair?” And he responded, “I don’t have the luxury of despair. I just have to keep going.” And maybe – for some of us – that’s what faith is. Not some heroic belief that God will make everything alright – despite all evidence to the contrary – but simply refusing to give into despair in the face of our own very real suffering, or the suffering of people we love.

Turn to the cover of your bulletin.

There you'll find a fifteenth century icon, painted by Andrei Rublev. An icon of the scene in chapter 18 of Genesis. The three men eating the meal, the oak of Mamre in the background. The painting is called "The hospitality of Abraham," or sometimes simply, "The Trinity." When the icon was renovated many years ago, the art preservationist detected glue on top of what appears to be a small rectangular hole in the table. It was theorized that that glue once secured a small mirror, so that when you gazed on the icon, you found yourself seated at the table with the three. You – all of you: doubts, questions, temptations, and, yes, perhaps even despair. All of who you are, seated at the table with the Trinity. Not least, the Second Person of the Trinity, who knows what it is to ask for something – and not receive it. "Is anything impossible for God?" Yes, everything is possible for God.

Except one thing.

"If possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not my will, thy will be done." The one thing not possible is the removal of the cup. To avoid the reality of suffering, hurt, the cross. And that is the God to whom we are invited to bring our own suffering and hurt, with however much or little faith we have. Not to claim that "everything is possible for God" with the kind of casual triumphalism that has wounded so many people. Wounded by words like, "You just need to have more faith" No. Everything is possible for those who sit with our own barrenness, with our own suffering, in the presence of the One who knows some things just have to be endured. And that even when we are unfaithful – as Abraham and Sarah surely were – God remains faithful to us. And that on the other side of whatever it is, however frightening it may be, something new will be born, and it will come to us as sheer gift. Perhaps, we may even laugh again one day. May it be so.