INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE

The scripture that we will hear today is part of a larger story, one that is understood as the foundation of the people Israel. Now, just to provide a little background, shortly after creation in Genesis, we have the flood, when God wipes everything out and commissions Noah to start a new creation and in chapter 11 we find a genealogy that takes us from Noah to Abram as Abraham was called prior to his covenant with God. And it’s in the 12th chapter of Genesis, that Abram hears the promise of God to make him the father of a great nation. It is here that Abram and Sarai are made aware that they will become the patriarch and matriarch of the Israelites. But then, here we are, 6 chapters later, and no child has been born to them. God has promised an heir to Abram and through this heir, Abram expects to realize the promise of God. However, much time has gone by and Abram has gotten quite old and, perhaps, more troubling for him is that his wife, Sarai, is beyond child-bearing years. Our scripture this morning begins here, with a 99-year-old Abram and a not much younger Sarai. Then in the second reading from Genesis, we hear of the visit of three "men," and Sarah and Abraham show them an extravagant welcome. And then, they are both surprised to hear these visitors reiterate that same promise of a son – now that they both are VERY old! And still, we need to skip forward another 3 chapters to hear of the fulfillment of the promise.

Sermon

So, as you have probably read in the eBlessing, we will be using the month of July to have a series of sermons on Women in the Bible. I will be preaching two sides of the same story – as we look at Sarah today and Hagar on July 24th. And I think it is particularly appropriate to turn our attention to Sarah today on July 3rd – the day before we celebrate our independence day. July 4th is remembered yearly as the birthday of a new nation, a nation founded with the high ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all. And Sarah was instrumental in the founding of another new nation, the ancient nation of Israel. Like our nation, this history of God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah, to found a new nation was not without its problems. The scriptures in Genesis tell us of the arrival of Abraham and all his extended family to the land of Canaan that we are told was given to them by God. And that Sarah, “shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” scripture tells us. And I had to wonder about this from Sarah’s point of view. I mean, she was 90 years old, we’re told. Now if I asked the women right here today who are merely in the 60s or 70s or 80s if they are up for giving birth now, I bet none of us would raise our hands. If I asked them if they want to spend the next 20 years raising that child, I
think I might hear a resounding, NO! Oh, we love our grandchildren! But, a child of our own in the autumn years doesn’t sound like a really great deal to me.

So when Sarah hears one of the men visiting Abraham say, “Sarah, your wife, will have a son,” she has to stifle her reaction. She’s heard that story before; for the last twenty-four years, to be exact. But now she is in her nineties, and Abraham is nearly one hundred years old. She has long since given up on that hope. It hurt for a while to wait and not to receive, wait, and not conceive. Then the hurt turned to anger, and finally the anger to resignation.

When she hears the seemingly empty promise again, it strikes her as…well, funny! “Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’” [Gen. 18:12]. She is still holding her hand over her mouth when the man talking to her husband speaks again. He says, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’” “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.” Oh my goodness, Sarah must be thinking. He has heard my thoughts! Who is this guy? This is no ordinary man! Terrified at what is happening, she shouts from inside the tent, “I did not laugh.” Without even turning in her direction, the stranger says, “Yes, you did laugh” [Gen. 18:13-15].

So, what is the meaning of Sarah’s laugh? Here’s what I think is going on in that laugh. I think Sarah is finding the idea of having a baby at her age absurd and surprising – maybe surprisingly absurd. Absurd because the notion of pregnancy for a 90-year-old woman is nothing if not absurd. Surprising because it is so totally unexpected and unanticipated. She had given up on that dream long ago. But absurdity and surprise go together. She can laugh at how preposterous this all is, the absurdity of an old woman having a baby, of having one foot in the grave and the other in a maternity ward. But she learns that with God, all things are possible. She can hear the Lord say, “your wife will have a son;” and she can crack up in her bitterness. And what is God’s response? What does Sarah hear? …“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

That is why God’s response has such force. When he says, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” he is inviting Sarah to have a really good laugh and let surprise back into her life. He invites us to do the same.

I know a little about laughing at God. You see, I was old, when I heard God calling me to ordained ministry. I was in my 50s when I was sitting in my living room, reading The Good Book by Peter Gomes when I had this overwhelming sudden insight that I needed to go to divinity school and pursue ordination. And just like Sarah, I laughed! “Is anything too wonderful for God?” That is an overwhelming and shattering question. It demands an answer. Answer yes, there are things too wonderful for God and the world is shut down, the universe is closed, our faith is in vain and God is no longer God … benevolent, kindly and concerned, perhaps; but as powerless as we are in the face of our cosmic reality. Answer “No, there is nothing that is too wonderful for God,” and you and the world are in God’s hands and the possibilities are endless. God is radically free to keep God’s promises, despite the odds against it.
And so, Sarah and Abraham founded a nation – a nation that we know God loves and counts as his very own, and yet a nation that was by no means perfect. If it were perfect, we would not need all the books of the Old Testament that come after Genesis. We learn of all the ways that this new nation had problems. Heck, things got so bad that we don’t even get out of Genesis before we find Joseph’s brothers, all descendant of Sarah’s, selling their brother into slavery which eventually lead to the entire nation being enslaved in Egypt.

No, this nation that they founded was not perfect, but it was beloved of God.

... And this nation that our founding fathers established here in America some 240 years ago, is not perfect either. But like the nation of Israel in the Bible, our experiment in democracy was founded on high ideals. Just listen to these words that Thomas Jefferson wrote: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator, with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Did you ever wonder about that word, “inalienable?” It means “unable to be taken away from OR given away by the possessor.” These are God-given rights, said the signers of the Declaration of American Independence.

... The ideal that all men – and we as a nation have improved on that sentiment by maintaining that - all people are created equal and that God - the Creator endowed all of us with rights to life, to freedom and to happiness...And that’s a pretty close model to the covenant that God made with Sarah and Abraham. Our experiment in democracy, begun 240 years ago tomorrow, invites each of us into a covenant with one another, a covenant that should supercede political parties, should supercede positions on particular issues, such that we may come together on this day to remember that we are all living into the hope for life, liberty and happiness for all people in our nation.

... But before we can claim our heritage as people of one nation, we must acknowledge that we first descendants of Sarah and Abraham. We must live into the sure knowledge that we are bound to one another as people of God Almighty, bound together through the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. And that covenant requires us to care for one another.

That sacred covenant, founded through Sarah, holds us to a standard of love for all of God’s creation. That covenant knows no national boundaries, for with God, all people are beloved.

... We often hear talk of the God of Abraham, but without Sarah, there would be no nation, no people of the covenant. God used Sarah to enter into a loving agreement with all of creation and we know that answer to the question, “Is anything too wonderful for God?” No, nothing is. Amen.