July 17, 2016

Genesis 18:1-15 (MSG)

I don’t know if you’ve ever been given a promise that was laughable, but some of ‘em just are, aren’t they? Somebody tells you, “You’re gonna win the lottery.” Or, “You’ll live happily ever after.” “This won’t hurt.” “Try it, you’ll like it.” Or, the other one we tell our kids: “It’ll be fun, I promise--you won’t be bored!” Sometimes it’s all you can do to keep from rolling your eyes when you hear stuff like that, but sometimes you just can’t help it—sometimes you just burst out laughing… I think of political promises—what we’ve only begun having to endure this election year—all that outlandish, laughable, poppycock… Here’s what one enterprising truck driver thinks about it all:



And so it goes…

Well, based on the story we read a moment ago, even the Bible has its share of laughable promises, right from the git-go… Listen to how a wise man (and teacher of mine)--the scholar and writer Walter Brueggemann--has it--he says:

*So, our faith-father, Abraham, was a very old man—and his wife, Sarah, our faith-mother, almost equally old--meaning they could not have a child.* (I mean, seriously--Abraham is, like, ninety-nine—Sarah ninety--to give you an idea just how ridiculous this story’s about to become!) *All their hopes, all God’s promises, the whole grand thing--that they were gonna be the parents of an entire nation of God’s people—it all hinged on their having a child to inherit God’s promise. But there was no child. Sarah was barren. Abraham did have Ishmael, born of a surrogate mother, but that was it. And so now, old, cynical Abraham is prepared to let Ishmael be his sole, rightful heir (a kind of “heir-with-an-asterisk”)--because nobody else was on the horizon--not even possibly.* (The twinkle had long gone out of Abraham’s eye, don’t you see…)

*Of course--as the story unfolds—as the biblical story always unfolds—it turns out God has something more in store--more faith--more resilience--more confidence in the future—more than Abraham does--more than Sarah does (more than you or I* do*, for that matter…). Because God says this yearned for, unexpected, desperately wanted baby--God says that baby will be born—and not of normal, human circumstance, but simply by the power and fidelity of Almighty God. This is a birth that will defy all explanation—that will defy all reason—a birth that will cause wonder and astonishment and gratitude and praise and yes, even laughter--will set this old couple’s feet to dancing. It is a promise against all odds--a reminder that biblical faith is grounded in God’s capacity to keep promises--that ours is a God of surplus surprises—surprises that outrun our ability to control or explain or predict.[[1]](#footnote-1)* And that drives us crazy, doesn’t it—makes us bonkers! So we laugh--just like Sarah laughed…

Well, while the doubt gets pinned on Sarah this time around, don’t forget old Abraham had his share of doubts, too. See, Abraham was full of “Yes, buts…” You know that response, don’t you? The promise comes along--Abraham says, “Well, yes--but I’m too old,” (Genesis 17:17). Or, “Yes, but Sarah’s too old.” Or “Yes, but she’s not pregnant. Yes, but we only have Ishmael.” Can’t you just hear the weariness in that voice! God says, “Can you imagine a newborn son given to you? Can you imagine a covenant kept to countless generations? Can you imagine land given to people who don’t have any?” It’s not, “Can you plan it—can you implement it—can you achieve it, Abraham.” No--it’s, “Can you entrust a possibility to God that goes beyond your own capacity for control and predictability and explanation?” And Abraham says, “No, I can’t…” And so Sarah laughed—because the promise was too ridiculous, too preposterous, too outrageous… God had spoken through these three mysterious visitors--and Sarah was eavesdropping—heard the most ridiculous thing--and she just couldn’t help herself—blurted it out--laughed at the news. Verse twelve says she laughed to herself--but God heard it—and now it was too late—cat out of the bag… She figures out that she’s been overheard, so now she’s afraid—tries a cover-up--says she didn’t laugh. And in one of the funniest lines in the entire Bible, God says, “Oh yes, you did too laugh.” (We’re not told how long this back-and-forth went on, but I can just imagine: “No, really, I didn’t...” “Yes you did!” “Did not.” “Did too.” “Did not.” “Did so.” “Did not—na nanna boo boo!” Ever had one of those exchanges with God?)

It’s a pattern that repeats itself all through the Bible. Jesus comes along and says, “Can you imagine a dinner for everybody? Can you imagine a blind boy getting to see? Can you imagine a prodigal welcomed home—a rough and tumble Pharisee reborn into the innocence of a child? Can you imagine lepers being healed and widows taken care of and people not discriminated against on the basis of race or social class?” Most people said no, but even the best of them said, “Well, yes, but…”

See, in our day, “Yes, but” usually wins out. After all, it’s prudent—it’s reasonable—it makes sense. But then one day we wake up--realize we’ve become cynical--our hearts hardened--even given to despair.

* “Can you imagine a world where old people are valued?” “Yes, we can--but—but think of the costs—or think of how much time we waste waiting for them to catch up…“
* “Can you imagine a world where there’s enough food for everybody?” “Yes, I can, but—but what about my standard of living?”
* “Can you imagine a marriage or relationship restored--reconciled?” “Well, yes, I can, but—but he always, or she always \_\_\_\_\_” (fill in the blank). (Which by the way, is the perfect word to use about somebody else if you’re in a relationship conflict—say “always,” or “never” about the other person—guaranteed to make things all better! **Not**… ☹)
* Can you imagine a society where people are not profiled by those in power on the basis of the color of their skin?

Last week a colleague of mine told me a story of something that happened to him. Shawn grew up here at Park Avenue--is now a pastor--but before he became a pastor he was a police officer for a time—describes the day he graduated from the police academy and got his badge—describes it as the proudest day of his life. Because he was a newbie, he was assigned to bicycle detail, at first—was a bike cop—told to go out and patrol a neighborhood where there’d been a series of garage burglaries. So he did—had his jacket on that said **POLICE** on the back, had his police helmet on, had his bike and his radio to get messages from the dispatcher… He’s riding through the neighborhood when a call comes in—apparently a suspicious black male on a bike had been reported poking around in the area. And it dawned on Shawn—“That would be me.” And as he told the story, he said, “They did not see the word on my jacket; they did not see the word on my helmet; all they saw was the color of my skin, and that the person they had been taught to fear—a young, black male—was someplace he wasn’t supposed to be. And what had just been the proudest moment of his life suddenly met up with the harsh reality of what he was still up against… Yes, but…

You know, when I think about the “Yes, buts” that come out of my mouth (especially the ones I think I’m keeping to myself), almost always it’s because there’s something I don’t want to relinquish—something I don’t want to let go of—something I don’t want to give up control of. See, I’d much rather live by sight than by faith—by what I think I know is a sure thing--much rather try and save my life than lose it… See, I can’t afford to let go, especially not for a promise that’s laughable. But along comes an old man named Abraham--and along comes an old woman named Sarah--people for whom “yes, but” turned out not to be the last word, meaning things got all turned upside down...

Another one of my teachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, put it this way: (she says)

*It’s a hard thing, believing in a promise—living by it, day after day--seeing it in the night sky--hearing it in your name--seeing it in your partner’s eyes. It is a hard thing, to believe in a promise with absolutely no power to make it come true. Everything’s in the future tense—the land, the child, the blessing--everything* ***will*** *happen, by and by, but in the meantime, what’s there to live on* ***now****?*

*And yet (and yet…), what better way to live than in the grip of a promise, and a divine one at that? Who in his or her right mind would give that back? To wake up every morning to the possibility that today just might be the day? To search the face of every stranger in case it turns out to be an angel of God? To take nothing for granted? To handle every single moment of your life as a seed of the promise--to plant it ever so tenderly, never knowing if this moment, or the next, might be the one that grows? To live like that is to discover that the blessing of God is not in the future; it’s now! It’s a promise that may not be all the way in hand--may still be on the way. But to live reverently, deliberately, fully awake—that’s what it means to live in the promise, where the wait itself is as rich as the end. And all it takes are some reminders, because as long as the promise is renewed, it’s alive--as vivid as a rainbow…*



*…as real as a billion stars overhead.*



*It’s what Abraham and Sarah at long last found out--after they’d had their one good laugh. They found out that God’s promise was stitched into their hearts—found out that God had never left them alone or forsaken them—found out that while there were fat times and lean times they were all God’s times--rolling on out ahead of that old couple like a red carpet to walk on. And never did any of it seem more true to either of them, than one fine Spring morning--in Sarah’s ninetieth year--when she came in from the garden—came to her husband—old Abraham napping on his Lazy Boy; she’s drying her hands on her dress, and with a gleam in her eye, she says, “Abraham, I’ve got something to tell you…”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

1. Paraphrased from “The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power and Weakness,” pages 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From “Gospel Medicine,” pages 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)