

## SERMON FOR SUNDAY 14<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2020

How long can you keep believing that a promise made will come true? Could you keep believing after one week, after one month, or even after one year? Could you possibly hold onto believing that a promise would be fulfilled after waiting for a decade? Could you keep trusting, keep being faithful for that long, when there is no sign that the promise is about to be fulfilled?

What about twenty five years? Could you keep trusting in a promise, no matter how many times it had been repeated? Could you keep trusting that it would be fulfilled after that long a time had elapsed? Even when the one making the promise was God (Yahweh)?

Could you have the patience, let alone the faith to believe that the promise could come true, holding on in faith for more than twenty five years?

That surely must have been an all too real question for Abraham and Sarah as the years rolled past, especially when the promise was a promise of descendants, and they were getting old even when the promise was made for the first time way back in Haran. Now, twenty five years later they were positively decrepit. How could Sarah conceive and carry a child to term when she was well past the menopause, when she hadn't even been able to conceive when she was young and healthy?

Can you blame her for laughing when one of the three strangers that had appeared at their encampment, out near the oaks of Mamre, proclaimed that she would soon be pregnant? Wouldn't you laugh if you were an old age pensioner and you were told that you would soon be pregnant? You'd surely laugh at the absurdity of the notion.

I know that if someone made such a suggestion to me that I'd crack up. It would just be unbelievable.

It's really no wonder, when you think about it, that Sarah and Abraham have struggled to believe in the truth of the promise, and had at times given into doubt and eventually had tried a bit of a do it yourself type of solution to the problem of a lack of descendants. After more than a decade of waiting for God to act, Sarah had acted. She had given Abraham her maid servant Hagar as a type of surrogate mother, and Ishmael had been born as a result of their affair. But even after the birth of Ishmael, God had continued to insist to Abraham that the descendants that he had promised to Abraham all those years ago would be through Sarah bearing a child.

But clearly Sarah just can't imagine how it could possibly be true.

And neither, I imagine, could Abraham either. After all, Abraham himself laughed with incredulity on his previous encounter with God, when God told him again that Sarah bear a child. In fact Abraham laughed so much that he fell down on his face, and asked God if it were really true. It was at that point that God had told him that he would have a son named Isaac.

God at that same encounter ordered Abraham and all the other men in his company to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant between him and God, and despite his incredulousness, Abraham had enough faith to obey that command. But clearly he was struggling to believe that what God had said could come true.

Sometime later God's messengers come again to Abraham to repeat the promise. One of them says to Abraham, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Sarah overhears the conversation and impulsively reacts with laughter. But the messengers are deadly earnest, and challenge her incredulousness. Sarah tries to pretend that she hadn't really doubted, but the messengers aren't fooled by her denials. They say to her, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" What Sarah hasn't realised was that she and Abraham were actually in the presence of God, who not only is able to do the seemingly impossible, but who also can read the human heart and mind. Nothing, after all, can be concealed from God.

But God evidently has some sympathy for human weakness, for despite their imperfect and wavering faith, God still blesses them with the birth of Isaac and thereby keeps the promises made so long ago to Abraham. God evidently has a sense of humour, for the name that Abraham and Sarah are given for their son, Isaac, means laughter or joke, perhaps for the laughter he will bring to their lives or maybe because they had reacted with laughter to God's promise of a son. His birth does show that nothing is impossible for God.

We might like to ask the question about why they were kept waiting for so long? Clearly, it was a very hard trial of faith to put Abraham and Sarah through. If we do ask that question, we know we can't find an answer that has total surety, for we do not have a full understanding of God's thinking. What we do know is that this is a foundational story for people of faith- both Jews and Christians. Consequently, we can understand that the way things happened was not by chance.

In the Bible, this story marks the beginning of the realisation that we have a God who has a personal relationship with people. Furthermore, this God journeys with people through their lives giving them love, guidance and strength. Sometimes, this God even much dramatic interventions in their lives.

Abraham and Sarah were chosen for the beginning of this new way in which God was to be present to God's people. God generously made some fantastic promises to them of what God would give to them and their descendants.

But what God required of them, and would consequently require of those who followed them was faith, i.e. Trust in God. And from the beginning, it was clear that this trust was going to be a struggle for humanity. Especially as it seems that the human pattern seems to be more set for infidelity than fidelity, and for humans to take matters into their own hands rather than to wait on God (as we saw with the using of Hagar as a surrogate mother). God says, "I am trustworthy. You can have complete trust in me for I can even do the impossible. But I will act in my own good time. You are called to faithfulness and patient trust."

It is a good reading to sit alongside of today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. For in it, Paul reminds the Christians in Rome, who are having a hard time, that God is present to us even in hard times, including times of suffering and hardship.

Paul says, "... but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Romans 5:3b-5 I know that these verses are underlined in an awful lot of Bibles, because they are so important.

God promises that God is, and will be, present to give us what we need in times of suffering and even to make these times of hardship times of great learning and growing in faith.

In these days of great unrest, when the issue of endemic racism is again being highlighted, it is good to be reminded of the example of that great civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the other American civil rights leaders endured unbelievable amounts of violence and provocation, some of it from police and the very people who should have been protecting them. Martin Luther King Jr once remarked that what sustained him through the difficult days of the civil rights movement was the promise of God's presence and guidance. When he was in ministry at Birmingham, Alabama, King was chosen to be the spokesperson for the Montgomery Improvement Association. Shortly after assuming this role as community leader and activist, King began receiving phone calls threatening not only his life, but also the lives of his wife and children. One night a caller ordered him to leave town in three days or risk having his house firebombed. Unable to sleep, King went to the kitchen hoping to find some relief in a hot cup of coffee. As he sat at the kitchen table, he wrestled with how he could deal with the present crisis and came face to face with the reality that he could lose his wife or new born daughter at any moment.

In this moment of crisis, King bowed his head and prayed, "Lord I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But I'm weak now. I'm faltering and I'm losing my courage." At that moment King heard a voice saying, "Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth and 'Lo, I will be with you even till the end of the world!"

From that moment on King was sustained by God's promise to be with him. He was given the strength to endure and be faithful through the difficult civil rights battle. The hard times did not go away, but day by day God gave him the strength and the will to keep going. And he, in turn, inspired many others to keep working for equality and freedom.

We, too, can trust that God will be with us in all of our lives, including the hard times, as we can be sure that God keeps God's promises. The Christian faith (and the Jewish faith before that) has never been an insurance policy that saves us from hardship, sorrow or suffering. We see that in the story of Abraham and Sarah, but we also see in that story that God is faithful, God is with us, and God will guide us and love us and give us hope. Amen.