

Walter Brueggemann's commentary on this passage from Genesis begins this way: "Once again, this story shows what a scandal and difficulty faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. Embrace of this radical gospel requires shattering and discontinuity."

Wow. If the embrace of the gospel requires shattering and discontinuity, then are we ever ready to embrace the gospel. Our lives have been completely disrupted, our plans for at least the next few weeks and months have been shattered.

What does it mean to have faith in the midst of these life circumstances? What does it mean to believe in an ever loving God when the world is struggling? For me, it helps to hear that faith is not a reasonable act. Our faith stories, like this one of Sarah and Abraham, help us hear what God has done in the past and help us imagine what God might do or be doing for us.

Abraham and Sarah were an old, barren couple. And they had become accustomed to their barrenness. They were resigned to a life without children of their own. Their plans for a large family, for heirs to carry on the family line, to care for them in their old age, their plans have unraveled. They have accepted their hopelessness as normal. God does not meet them when they are hopeful but in their hopelessness.

For me, the most important question in this whole story is this from verse 14. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? It is also translated, Is anything too hard for God? Is anything too astonishing for God? Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

I don't want to diminish the pain that Abraham and Sarah felt. Their story has a lot of difficulty in it. Abraham and Sarah made a lot of mistakes, caused a lot of pain, experienced a lot of suffering. AND, there is nothing too hard, too difficult, too astonishing, too wonderful that God can't meet them in it. Nothing is too astonishing for a God who made it all and loves it all.

What is unraveling for you and for us right now? Ways of being church, your job or job prospects, your travel plans, your visits to family, sometimes family who is ill or struggling. There is nothing too difficult for God not to meet you in it. In our Affirmation of Faith today, we will say: When life unravels, God is there to stitch

my wounds together, To hold me in the palm of God's hand, to tell me of love,
And to invite me into a new journey.

Our prayers aren't always answered in the way that Sarah and Abraham's prayers were answered, but what we can trust is this—sometimes, even after life seems to fall apart, God can surprise us and unravel our plans with unexpected joy if we are willing to receive it.

Faith is an unreasonable act. In Chapter 18, Sarah first laughs in disbelief. She laughs because what is suggested of her seems laughable, having a child in her old age. In this week where we celebrate 50 years of Earth Day, I think of some of the positive environmental effects we are seeing from staying at home would have been laughable just months ago, clear skies in polluted cities, ocean wildlife in the canals of Venice, less seismic activity around the globe. Or the online concerts or late night talk shows being filmed in houses or how many people have learned ZOOM. Or the fact that I am delivering this sermon to a video camera and I haven't seen any of you in over a month! And yet we are still being church, we are still loving God and loving our neighbors even though every single church activity has been outside of our building. That would have been laughable just a few months ago.

I heard a story this week of a small town that challenged their volunteer sewers to create 1,000 cloth masks for their healthcare workers in a weekend. A laughably large goal. By the end of the weekend, they had made 2,000 masks. Stories like this abound, here in Red Wing and around the country and the world, people doing seemingly impossible things in an effort to help each other out. Is anything too wonderful, too difficult, too astonishing for God?

First Sarah laughs in disbelief. In Genesis 21, when Isaac is born, whose name is related to the word "to laugh", Sarah laughs she says because God has made laughter for me. Walter Brueggemann says, "Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained. The newness is sheer gift—underived, unwarranted."

In the Easter story, we say that God has broken the grip of death, hopelessness, barrenness, and even in the midst of a pandemic we can say that death is not the final word. Laughter helps us remember that. Why do we laugh, why do we find

joy even where there is so much suffering, even when each of us is grieving a thousand big and small losses?

Because, as Christian Wiman says in the book he edited with poems of joy, “Joy is the only inoculation against the despair to which any sane person is prone.”

In one of those poems, A Brief for the Defense, Jack Gilbert explains it this way: “We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.”

I watched a webinar this week that I highly recommend, it’s on our website, please watch it, created by the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, from their vast experience of dealing with and being on the front line of disasters about how we build resilience in ourselves and our communities and one of the tools that they suggest we use is doing things every day that lift our spirits. Maybe for you that is calling a friend, gardening, singing, dancing. Doing things every day to lift our spirits, helps us build our resilience for the days ahead. Our family has taken to watching funny cat videos every night. What is one thing you can do to lift your spirits today?

In an effort to laugh in the face of suffering, we are going to watch a video of laughter, as an expression of our faith, as a way of saying there is nothing too difficult for God to meet us in, as an antidote to despair, as a proclamation of our Easter faith. God has made laughter for you and for me. May it be so. And let us laugh. Amen.