

The Fourth Sunday in Advent – Pr. Faugstad sermon
Genesis 17:15-22: “We Will Laugh.”
December 21/22, 2024 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

Come, Thou precious Ransom, come, / Only Hope for sinful mortals!
Come, O Savior of the world! / Open are to Thee all portals.
Come, Thy beauty let us see; / Anxiously we wait for Thee. *Amen.*
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* #88, v. 1)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the seventeenth chapter of the Book of Genesis. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” / Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” / God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.” / When He had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who leads His people to the heavenly Zion with singing, everlasting joy upon their heads, where they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa. 35:10), dear fellow redeemed:

Abram and Sarai experienced a particular pain that many have experienced since then—they were unable to have children. This is the first detail the Bible shares about Sarai, that she “*was barren; she had no child*” (Gen. 11:30). Undoubtedly this caused them much sadness. As the years passed and no child was conceived, they became more and more resigned to the fact that they would have no descendants. They passed into their forties, then their fifties, then their sixties. By this time, Abram had become a very wealthy man. He had great possessions and many servants.

Then rather abruptly, the LORD told Abram to leave his country and his relatives and go to a new land. He said to Abram, “*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Gen. 12:2-3). If Abram had any

doubts about this, they are not recorded for us. He might have wondered how his name would become great and all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. For one thing, he had no children. For another, he was at this time seventy-five years old, and Sarai was sixty-five!

But Abram obeyed. He gathered all he had and traveled to the land of Canaan. When he got there, the LORD appeared to him and said, *"To your offspring I will give this land"* (v. 7). A while later, the LORD repeated the promise, *"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your offspring be"* (15:5). Abram believed what God said (v. 6).

But ten years passed after the LORD told Abram and Sarai to move. Sarai was now seventy-five. If she hadn't had a child yet, how could she now? She decided to give her servant to Abram as another wife, so that if her servant conceived a child with him, Sarai would count the child as hers. Her servant did conceive and gave birth to a son named Ishmael. But Ishmael was not the child of God's promise.

Thirteen years later when Abram was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him again and told him, *"You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham"* (17:4-5). Abraham means "father of a multitude." At the same time, the LORD changed the name Sarai to Sarah which means "princess," and He promised Abraham that he would have a son by Sarah.

Abraham's reaction is recorded for us. He *"fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'"* Now as you know, there are different kinds of laughter. Some point their fingers and laugh when they are ridiculing a person or showing their disdain for him. Some laugh when they are shocked or surprised. Martin Luther was convinced that Abraham laughed "because he was filled with great gladness and joy" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 3, p. 154).

He was filled with joy because he understood that God's promise of a son was about more than providing him an heir. It was about making a way for all the families of the earth to be blessed (12:3). The promise the LORD made to Abraham is the same promise He made to Adam and to Noah. God would send a Savior to redeem sinful mankind. Jesus pointed back to this promise when He said to the Jews, *"Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad"* (Joh. 8:56).

Abraham's laugh coincided with the name of his son. God said to him, *"you shall call his name Isaac,"* a name which means "he laughs." A year later, that son was born. And the new mother Sarah said, *"God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.... Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age"* (Gen. 21:6-7). And every time they held that little baby and listened to his little grunts and coos, what else could they do but laugh?

But we can't help but wonder: Why did God do this? Why did He make Abraham and Sarah wait until they were one hundred years old and ninety years old before they had a child? The author of the book of Hebrews writes in a very understated way that Sarah *"was past the age"* of being able to conceive, and in a more expressive way that Abraham was *"as good as dead"*

(11:11,12). If this amazing birth were not recorded in the Bible, we would laugh at the possibility.

And that is the point. What we consider impossible, God makes possible. No one can say that Abraham and Sarah were the ones to keep the promise of a Savior alive. They were incapable of having children. They were very old. And God gave them laughter. He gave them Isaac. He wanted to show that this child was a gift, just as all children are. He wanted to show that His promise would neither fail nor succeed because of the work of man. God's promises succeed because He is God.

That means we can trust His promises. What makes this difficult is our sinful tendency to trust ourselves. We act as if everything depends on ourselves instead of God. We offer weak prayers, if we offer them at all, because we are convinced that God will not give us what we pray for. Or we get impatient when we ask something of Him, and He makes us wait—maybe when we are sick or injured or in trouble. We might even attach a demand to our requests: "If You love me, You will do this by this day or this time." What we are really doing is putting ourselves in the position of God, and by our lack of faith we are calling down His judgment instead of His mercy. When we take matters into our own hands, like Sarai did by giving her servant to Abram, we often experience unexpected and unpleasant consequences.

God's plans are much better than ours, and His promises are rock-solid. When He makes a promise, nothing will change His mind. He fulfilled His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son. And He fulfilled His promise to send a Savior through Abraham's line. Some two thousand years down the road, God sent His angel to another old man, a priest named Zechariah. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were also old and barren like Abraham and Sarah. And the angel said, "*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John*" (Luk. 1:13). Zechariah did not respond in faith like Abraham, and for his disbelief, God made him unable to speak until after John was born.

John was a messenger, "*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'*" (Joh. 1:23). He pointed to One much greater than he, "*the strap of whose sandal [he was] not worthy to untie*" (v. 27). That One was the Son of God incarnate, the descendant of Abraham and Isaac, the fulfillment of God's promise to save the world. God sent His Son to take on human flesh because He loves you so deeply and so perfectly. Jesus came to be your righteousness, to live blamelessly under the Law in your place. He came to atone for your many sins by shedding His holy blood on the cross. He came to conquer your death by rising from the dead in victory.

He came to give you hope as you struggle with your doubts and fears. He came to give you peace as the guilt of your sins weighs down on you. He came to give you comfort in your pain and sadness. The hymnwriter Paul Gerhardt put it beautifully in his great Advent hymn:

Rejoice, then, ye sad-hearted, / Who sit in deepest gloom,
Who mourn o'er joys departed, / And tremble at your doom;
Despair not, He is near you, / Yea, standing at the door,
Who best can help and cheer you, / And bid you weep no more.

No care nor effort either / Is needed day or night,

How ye may draw Him hither / In your own strength and might.
He comes, He comes with gladness, / Moved by His love alone,
To calm your fear and sadness, / To Him they well are known. (ELH #94, vv. 6-7)

God promises to come to you through His Word and Sacraments. Through those means, He promises to forgive you. He promises to strengthen you. He promises to renew your faith, so that you have joy even when you are suffering, even when you are struggling. You have joy in knowing that you do not walk through this life alone, that there will be an end to the sadness of this life, and that Jesus will return on the last day to take you to His kingdom of glory.

The time of your final redemption is drawing near. The time will come when the joy you have in Christ will be perfected, when sin, death, and devil will no longer bother you, when you will forever forget the troubles you had here. Then we will sing. We will shout with gladness. And with Abraham and Sarah and all the saints, **We Will Laugh.**

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

+ + +