

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Unsettling the Mind

A sermon preached on June 15, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Romans 5:1-8 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 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. 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person -- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Genesis 18:1-15 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on -- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7 Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. 9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" 13 The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

How old is "old?" "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you were?" was Satchel Paige's incisive question. "You're too old for that kind of behavior," I used to say to my kids when I was eager for them to grow up and they were just as eager to keep being kids. "When are you guys going to grow up," a church member said to me when she saw me pull into the parking lot on my motorcycle. "He's too young," some people say of Mr. Obama; "he's too old," others say of Mr. McCain. The object of life, Bill Coffin used to say, is to die young as old as possible.

Several years ago some family friends visited my parents who at that time were about eighty-five years old. These friends hadn't seen me for some time, so they asked my folks how I was doing. My mother allowed as how I seemed to be doing ok, but she said that every time she saw me I looked older. At which point, my friends report, my father reached over, patted my mother on her hand and said, "Well, Dear, he's growing up."

Well, sooner or later we all grow up, and part of that growing-up process is learning that not everything we desire in life will come to pass. We grow beyond our expectations. We realize that many of our dreams and aspiration won't be coming true.

All Abraham and Sarah had wanted was a child — a single son to continue the family line. Their childlessness was a crisis in that culture where property and privilege flowed along the male line. But there was neither firstborn nor second born — only barrenness, and now time had erased the possibility of any progeny at all.

"You're only as old as you feel," chirps the vitamin ads. Well, sometimes, but not this time. Sometimes you really are too old, regardless of health and vital faith. The greater the mileage, the more compelling is the body's logic. Given all reasonable expectations of the span of a human life, Abraham had at least one foot in the grave. As my father used to say, he may have been heir-inclined, but he wasn't heir-conditioned. It was not only the heat that had him sitting in the shade midday, it was also the wear and tear of a long, labored life.

He and Sarah (who was well up in years herself) were so far beyond the time of starting a family that she couldn't stifle that great belly laugh when she heard the strangers predict she would bear a child. She practically falls on her face and rolls on the ground holding her sides. "Stop! Stop! You're killing me!" I can hear her gasp between guffaws, helpless in the raw comedy of her bearing, feeding, diaper-changing, and rocking in the desert wilderness a mewling newborn.

Well, you've got to admit, these writers of scripture had quite the sense of humor. Some years ago my daughter sent me a snapshot of me holding Parker, my grandson. He was in the bloom of robust toddlerhood. I, on the other hand, was a poster child for the ravages of middle-age. On the back of the picture my daughter had written "Parker, age 9 months; Dad, age 55" — a gratuitous inscription if there ever was one! One of the joys of grandparenthood is the privilege of giving the visiting grandchildren

back to their parents. But here were poor Abraham and Sarah, who had achieved the age of great-great-grandparenthood and had no younger generation to pass the child back to. It's a blessing; it's a dirty trick. It's a much longed for gift; it's a curse. Note, please, that the word *majesty* – as in *the majesty of God*, has the word *jest* at its center.

About birth, death, and the life in between, scripture isn't in the least sentimental. At every turn scripture's concern is not the emotional state or convenience of the human characters in the story, but the will and intention of the main character – God. This story may strain credulity regarding the ages of Abraham and Sarah, but it refuses to give an inch to any dewy-eyed tendency in us to coo over the baby or feel sorry for the plight of these ancient parents. In scripture we get dry-eyed presentations of faith as that which both settles and unsettles, comforts and costs, brings peace and a sword. In scripture, faith has ragged edges, inflamed centers, and it smells of birth, life, and death. And so we have at the center of our faith, a man on a cross. And, we have at the beginning of the story of God's plan of salvation two characters named Abraham and Sarah who, excessively late in life, accepted in faith the gift and toils of rearing a son.

In *George Burns and the Hundred Year Dash*, his biographer describes how the late showman's career never really took off until he was in his eighties, as earlier he was primarily a comedy writer and played wife Gracie Allen's straight-man. Burns, who died just weeks short of his hundredth birthday, was still performing in his middle nineties. He would walk on stage to rapturous applause and say, "I get a standing ovation just for standing." Scripture, too, has its own wry sense of things. Abraham and Sarah names the child Issac — *Itzak*, in Hebrew — which means "laughter."

Laughter, and its kin *irony, joy, and surprise*, is a good place to begin thinking theologically about this story. "If you want to hear God laugh, spell out your plans," goes the old saying, but here the line runs backwards. This time Abraham and Sarah must laugh; it was their only possible response to the shock and dismay they felt.

A sense of irony is a prerequisite if we are to think imaginatively about faith, which at root is what the story of Abraham and Sarah is all about. Without a sense of irony we can't appreciate the essence of the joke that runs through scripture. A family which, in the natural order of things ought to be pre-planning funerals is, instead, decorating the nursery; a rag-tag band of escaping slaves wades through water in which the pursuing army of the most powerful nation on earth drowns; a man executed for sedition and blasphemy is proclaimed God's greatest gift of grace and the world's savior.

Faith, these and the countless other stories and themes of scripture suggest, is the ability to perceive and respond to improbables, to the "thin places" of life where we detect something surprising, odd, and ironic glowing through the membrane of rationality and mundane common sense which serves to obscure the presence of the divine in life. That was Sarah's first reaction; of course, it would be ours as well. "How can this be...," she

muses, applying her not inconsiderable logic and intellectual vigor to the problem. "This is absurd!" is what she meant, and we think so too...except something remarkable happened, something astounding grew from the seed of her laughter, something incredible — literally — grew within this insignificant family which has changed the history of the world for the infinitely better. And, from the incongruities and absurd events of our life, a faith strong enough for today emerges.

Each of us, just like Abraham and Sarah, must enter upon faith as a habit of the heart and mind, and let faith see through the thin places where audacious alternatives to living and thinking and dreaming are exposed, for it is here, and not in our carefully plotted, finely wrought plans that God's direction and will are exposed.

The strange unexpected things that happen to us — the devastating blow, the unanticipated birth, the chance encounter, the friend's odd and at first unmemorable remark, the disturbing dream, the haunting melody, the sudden unwelcome responsibility — they all have the awesome capacity to unsettle the mind and rearrange life toward promise. It is not until the mind is unsettled that God's irony can begin its important work with us.

Rilke wrote, "The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens." Do we first have faith, and then we begin the adventure of responding to God's call and lead? Or, does God first thrust us into a situation where we must discover what faith is all about? Do we need to be persons of faith before we can respond to God, or does God force us to accept life and in the process of living out the consequences we learn how to trust. Which comes first, the old riddle asks, the chicken or the egg? Well, here's the answer, and it applies to faith as well as to chickens and eggs: they come at the same time, one inside the other.