

# Following Through

a sermon based on

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

and delivered on-

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2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost(Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Can we go back to the passage from Genesis that Janet read a few moments ago? It's a wonderful story, beginning with "The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre." (Gen 18:1)

Although the story speaks of "three men" standing there Abraham addresses them as "my LORD" Our English translation obscures what he's saying. Abraham didn't say, "My lord or my lords" as if addressing a man or men of honor, "the LORD" here refers to the divine name – the name God revealed again later to Moses out of the burning bush.

Abraham recognized that these weren't just men, but messengers from God. (Billy Graham would say that is what angels are.) He'd already had encounters with God in this place. So, Abraham wastes no time and puts everything else aside and invites them to receive his hospitality. All of this happens within sight and earshot of the door to his tent. So that when "one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son,'" Sarah heard (Gen. 18:10) and then it says she laughed. (Gen 18:12)

It actually says she laughed to herself. I picture it this way, she's sipping on her own cup of tea having already served the: then she snorts and chokes. Maybe some tea comes out of her nose or she coughs out a piece of cake. She's not mocking. She's caught off guard.

But why?

This is not the first time that God had told Abraham that he would have children, even though he and Sarah were well into their nineties. Just go back to Genesis 15 and 16 and you'll hear the promise – and how they respond.

Sarah laughed (as Scripture says) not only because they were old, but because "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." (Gen. 18: 11) For Sarah – menopause was not the issue – she passed that a long time ago. She's at the point of her life on meno-stop, meno-done, meno-don't even think about it.

That's why when they first received a promise, she suggested that Abraham use her slave Hagar for the purpose. That was successful. Hagar bore Abraham a son, Ishmael. But that wasn't God's promise. God's promise was for Sarah and Abraham.

So why hadn't that promise materialized, yet?

I think they'd given up. They weren't even trying. It's the only reason that I can think of. Maybe it started before "it ceased to be the way with women." Abraham wasn't always that "adoring" of his wife.

Once before he'd told her to present herself as his sister rather than his wife out of fear that a king would see her beauty and kill him to take her so that, in Egypt, Pharaoh took her up to his house until the Lord afflicted him. (Gen. 12:13-20). He'd do it again later. Do you think that might have been playing in her mind? Maybe it wasn't just infertility that kept them childless.

Even more so when we hear again the promise of these three men that when they return Sarah will have born a son, I suspect that they hadn't been intimate in some time. Otherwise, Ishmael wouldn't still be an only child. God is faithful to the end of his promises.

How often does that happen? We ask God and we trust God in our prayers, but then the promise we'd hoped for or maybe a promise that had been revealed in Scripture or in that prayer doesn't materialize, but when it doesn't happen we start to doubt either the promise or God?

There's an old story, about a man named Simon. Simon had been a good man his whole life and loved the Lord. He'd also had a hard life. He'd struggled to make ends meet and had always been poor. One day, he prays, "Lord, you know that I love you and that I devoted myself to pleasing you; but my life has been hard. Please, let me win the lottery, so that I can enjoy the last days of my life." Knowing that God is faithful and that he hears the prayers of those who love him, Simon waited for Saturday and the lottery drawing. He didn't win.

He prayed again, "Lord, you know that I love you and that I devoted myself to pleasing you; but my life has been hard. Please, let me win the lottery, so that I can enjoy the last days of my life." The next Saturday came, but still he didn't win.

A third time he prayed. This time he was a bit angry. "Lord, you know me. You know my love for you. You know that I've not complained about my poverty, but I'd just like some ease in life. Why won't you let me win the lottery?!"

Suddenly, a voice boomed in his bedroom where he knelt praying, and he heard, "Simon, help me out. Buy a ticket."<sup>1</sup>

Now as Methodists, we don't buy lottery tickets; but we get it. Don't we?

This is more than the adage "God helps those who help themselves." That implies that God acts on our actions rather than on his promise. But at the same time, when God makes a promise, he doesn't impose it on us. He makes room for us to claim and to follow through.

We even see that on the cross. Yes, God acted in sending Jesus to teach and to heal and even to die for our sake. Never once, however, do we hear that Jesus forced anyone to be healed. He offered – he asked – then he healed. Even when he sent his disciples out (as we heard in the Gospel lesson, today) he told them not bother with those who didn't want what they offered. Even the salvation he offers from the cross isn't imposed on us, but we're offered the chance to claim it.

Maybe that was what Sarah needed. She and Abraham had to act on God's promise. It probably wasn't easy, when you think of all the baggage in their own relationship. She had to forgive him. He had to acknowledge that he hadn't exactly followed God's plan either when Hagar was introduced into the equation.

I don't think it was malevolent. It was misguided. God made a promise, so he acted in a way that the world told him would work. It hadn't worked with Sarah ever and now she was past that point, therefore, I have to find another woman up to that task. Even Sarah looked at it that way.

How often do we allow the things we "know" about the world, get in the way of acting out on God's promises even when they seem ridiculous?

We see it in so many places. Modern medicine can do wonders. So we abandon the possibility that God might actually offer healing directly.

We see the scourge of poverty – often perpetuated by racism and xenophobia – we give up or we ask politicians to fix it for us. We ignore God's promise that through us people can be healed and the oppressed set free. The reason is because the world tells us it's impossible or too intimidating. Often things are intimidating.

Sometimes we're intimidated because we're not sure that we understand God's promise correctly. Maybe we don't. Abraham and Sarah didn't. Even when they didn't God gave a son. But then God didn't give up on drawing them back to his actual promise.

Abraham realized that at the oaks of Mamre, because that's where he'd encountered God before. He waited and kept coming back seeking the God's direction.

When we do the same – when we keep coming back to God – things start to become clearer: not because God is too vague in the first place, but because we're often too dense.

God doesn't give up. He follows through on his promises to each of us. Our call is to follow through with claiming those promises. When we do. Miracles happen. Even today, miracles happen.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm not sure when or where I first heard this joke, but it is not original to me. A google search reveals many variants of the story.

They happen for us. As followers of Jesus Christ, like those seventy whom Jesus sent out, they happen through us.

Follow through. Claim the promises of God who proved his love through Jesus, and offers you the power to do even greater works in his name. AMEN.