

**Pentecost II**  
**Genesis 18:1-15 and Romans 5:1-5**  
**June 14, 2020**  
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I have an enduring interest in leadership; studying how people lead organization, nations. The prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, has been of particular interest. She has been cited for her empathy, clear communication skills, her capacity to persuade the country to take collective responsibility for containing the virus. One study noted how leaders who faced “wicked problems” – complex, hard to navigate obstacles – needed to hone the skill of having those difficult conversations that upend conventional ways of thinking.

I thought about such wicked problems, and empathic imagination in conjunction with George Floyd’s death as well. As his life was draining out of him, he called out for his mother. I saw a sign that read all the mothers of the world rose up at his cry. The two images have set next to one another: empathic communication and the vulnerability of such a dying cry, both summing something in each of us. We are living through a crucible time and the mighty questions that arise: country’s racially unjust past and present, white privilege, a collective pain, anger, sorrow and fear, on top of global virus with its health and economic impact summon our collective Christian discernment about what the faithful response might be right now.

Is faithfulness expressed in . . . showing up for worship on Facebook, is it, for some of us, naming our privilege, listening to new voices. Is faithful, for others, speaking the pain, sharing the stories? Is it providing canned goods to food pantry, a thank you or a prayer to a first responder? Is faithfulness attending a protest? Or sitting with the grief, emptiness, while also hanging on for another day? We are trying to be faithful, living in a time that holds the gospel promises of life, healing, beloved community and the actual fulfillment of these promises.

Abraham and Sarah are living in such an in-between time; suspended between God’s promise first spoken to them as a call from their old land: I will make you a great nation, bless you with land, offspring, and future – and – the fulfillment of the promise. Decades have passed. They remain nomads, child-less. They are old. They have moved, set up house, waited, prayed, and moved, waited, and prayed again. The disappointment in the promises delay has settled into their bones. After a while one gets used to being disappointed; accustomed to keeping your chin up, looking for that silver lining, adjusting your expectations, convincing yourself the small consolations are enough.

Biblical witness tells us God regularly appeared to remind Abraham and Sarah of the promise – coming through fire, smoke, voice in the night, a tug on their hearts. And when God appeared, God often asked them to respond in a way that affirmed their own keeping of the promise, acts that included moving homes, changing their names, the fleshly mark of circumcision. Such responses are not unlike invitation to us to display our promise-keeping capabilities: show up, speak up, reach out, to pray, to listen, to love.

The Biblical witness also reveals a particular dance Abraham and Sarah danced as they struggled to stay true to a promise that had not yet come to be: dance of holding on, letting go, trusting and falling away, trying again. It is the dance of every faithful, fallible person. God would speak to them and the promise would be renewed. Then the days would pass, without land or children. They would falter. Once they went into Egypt, pretending Sarah was Abraham's sister, at another point, Sarah sends her servant Hagar into Abraham's bedroom, hoping the birth of Ishmael would quell the emptiness of her own barren belly. One day, resigned to a lifetime of waiting, Abraham sits outside the tent, in the heat of the day, expecting nothing more than the slow passage of an empty afternoon.

Visitors arrive. Abraham jumps into action. Visitors in the desert depend upon the hospitality of others for survival: needing a little water and flat bread to ease the journey of sun, sand, and wind. We, the readers, know God has appeared. Abraham seems aware, at least, that these visitors are not ordinary ones. He offers them a feast. Perhaps, like many of us, he has gone enough days in isolation that he is desperate for company, ready for a break from the endlessly monotonous days. I suspect, though, his hospitality alerts him to the sacred dance humming in his life about to be renewed again. When God steps across your threshold, life changes. Key to his alertness is hospitality; the men eating of a generous meal under the shade of a tree.

Christian hospitality is more than bread and water. It is not minimum provisions but maximum welcome. A human being has arrived at your doorstep. Every meeting is an opportunity for us to link into the sacred dance of God's presence humming within our days. A piece of the struggle happening through our world is the righteous call to see another, to say the names, to have a full reckoning with all of our truths, all of our history. What hospitable space might open in us?

Abraham's hospitality enables the visitors to share their message, which is to speak the promise again: You and Sarah, old as you are, will have a son. And the child will come not in some distant, unnamed year ahead, but in the next season. You will have a son, soon.

When given the news that she would soon be pregnant, the 90-year-old Sarah laughed. Of course, she laughed. She's standing behind the tent's flap door, listening to 4 men talk about her body, her life. She knows exactly how unlikely their declaration is. She laughs alone, actually, because Abraham had heard the same pronouncement in the previous chapter, and he had fallen on his face in laughter. Sarah's laughter is not a dismissive cackle. It is the chuckle of a woman who have lived, loved, hoped, and moved, and prayed, and worked, and loved, and hoped, and moved, and prayed and cannot contain the hope bursting in her that the promise upon which her life has been built might be at her door.

Did you know that laughter increases the oxygen flow in your body, alters your cortisol levels, soothes weariness, and draws people together? Did you know that scientists believe laughter enables a mind that is constricted, narrowed, shut down to expand for new experiences? Sarah laughed. And by some indication, God laughed with her. Listen to the end of chapter 18: After

her son Isaac is born Sarah says God has brought laughter to me. Everyone who hears my story will laugh with me.

I suspect amid the weightiness of today's world a story that lifts up laughter seems inappropriate for the life and death stakes around us. But this laughter is not the giggles of the unconcerned, but a sound that holds together in the throat the weary disappointment of the past with some nascent peals of joy for the future, which might still be redeemed. Soon it will be a full belly laugh at the impossible becoming possible.

Why are you laughing? God replies, inviting Sarah into a conversation. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Standing there inside the tent, with just a sheet separating her from the messengers of God's promise, the woman who has waited decades for the promise to be fulfilled hears there is nothing too hard for God to accomplish, what God has in store is more marvelous than she can imagine. For this old couple God's promise takes the form of a child. For others escaping Egypt it is manna in the wilderness, fire to lead their path. For others, it is the ability to get up and walk when they thought they were frozen in place, for others it is a community to call family, for all of us it is a cross and an empty tomb. Trust the promises of God. See them in the eyes of another that you love, in the voices of strangers, in our gatherings together. Believe the promise, for in everything God works toward life.