

Sitting in the shade of his tent-flaps, he looks up to see three people standing where, minutes before, there had been no one. Not even wondering where they had come from, Abraham jumped up to greet them, bowing to them reverently. “Welcome, welcome!” he said. You favor me with your presence—please stop awhile and rest yourselves!” He knew, you see, that it was the Lord who had come; the Lord who he had spoken with many times over the years and had at one time made him a promise, of children and land and blessings. He had yet to see the promises fulfilled, but what of that? Here was God, with him, and he was going to make the most of it.

Inviting the visitors to wash their feet and rest in the shade, he ran to Sarah in the women’s tent: “we have company!” he said to her, “important company! Make some bread now, and don’t spare the flour—we want it to be the best bread we can make for our guests.” Then Abraham went to the field and selected a young calf to be prepared by the cook; and he gathered some fresh goats milk for cheese. “it’s going to be a wonderful feast! he thought to himself gleefully. “the best I have for the Lord!”

After the visitors had finished eating and resting they asked about Sarah. “She’s in the tent” Abraham told them. One of the visitors said, “when we pass this way next year, you and Sarah will be parents.” Sarah overheard this and snickered to herself: “I am an old woman, and he is an old man, and we should have pleasure together like the old days? Really?” But the Lord heard Sarah and asked Abraham, “why did Sarah laugh? Is there anything the Lord can’t do? Doesn’t she believe? Sarah was embarrassed and afraid. “I didn’t laugh” she said. “Yes you did” said the Lord.

Our faith tradition tells us that God has made promises to Abraham, and as descendants of Abraham (though we are grafted onto the tree, adopted in other words) we have inherited those promises. The specific promises of God to Abraham were of land, descendants, and blessings for those who would come after him. As Abraham had children and his children had children the blessings of God were passed down from generation to generation, to Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, out and out grow the roots and the branches for 42 generations if we believe Matthew’s gospel, until we get to Jesus; from Jesus the tree continues to grow, now with roots and branches grafted onto Abraham’s tree until truly those who claim Abraham as an ancestor are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Well, maybe that’s hyperbole but the lineage back to Abraham does spread out and thicken to form the massive ancestry that God promised him so many years ago. It begins with a relationship, with God reaching out to Abram reaching out to God; God promising and Abram responding. There are twists and turns—Abram and Sarai are old to begin with and have no children—but as the story goes Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah and they do have a son, Isaac. Only Isaac is the *second* son, another son has come before him, Ishmael, whose mother is Sarah’s servant Hagar. But that’s ok; perhaps this wasn’t God’s intention—Ishmael comes because of Sarah’s scheming—but God makes it known that the promise extends to Ishmael as well.

Is this why Sarah laughs? Through all of the years she has waited for a child and her plan to have one through a surrogate backfires in the extreme; and after all isn’t it Abraham who has this relationship with God, who has heard God’s voice and stood at God’s side while God showed him the stars that would represent the number of his family line? Why wouldn’t Sarah laugh when three strangers show up at her threshold and predict that within the year she would bear a child?

Perhaps this is why it is so hard for people today to believe in the promises of God as well. After all, we’ve been doing this church thing for thousands of years now and still the world is a hot mess. Perhaps when people drive by our church and see our sign they snicker and think, “what has this God business ever brought me?” Or however they would give voice to their 21st century individual

skepticism, their version of “I’m and old woman and he’s an old man, and we should now have pleasure?”

I know that there are people who drive by our sign—you can’t really see the church from the road but the sign is hard to miss—and I imagine their various lives—some people pretty content and happy, but many people harassed and harried by their very way of life. Harassed and harried by working two jobs, or one job they hate, or working and taking care of kids, or working and kids and elderly parents; or living in a neighborhood where shots regularly ring out and drugs are available on every corner. Where working a full-time job is often not enough for housing and food and gas for the car. Where debt hangs like an anchor around their necks, debt that was usually taken on for reasons that seemed good at the time but have become a torment. Where the system seems rigged for those who already have enough—enough wealth, enough support, enough of the right color of skin. When you think about all of the stories, sad and tragic and heartbreaking and, yes, funny and joyful, well, it’s amazing. It’s also amazing that most of them, if they notice us at all, snicker to themselves and say, not unlike Sarah, “What good is God? What use is religion? Why should I believe?”

In Matthew’s gospel we see Jesus moving among the cities and towns, teaching in the synagogues and healing all sicknesses, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. The crowds of people were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” and had compassion for them; but the word here in the Greek isn’t compassion as in just “feeling sorry for” but is a visceral reaction of anger and pain on their behalf. Not so much that they had no one leading them, but that they had no one caring for them; and that their harassment and helplessness came from a double system of governmental oppression by the Roman government and religious oppression by their own religious leaders.

And into this comes Jesus. Healing them, giving them good news, teaching them that another way is possible. That a religion that doesn’t acknowledge their pain and help them address it is no religion. That God is with them and for them and not against them. And even though he is the Rabbi, the Messiah, he gathers believers to him who are to listen and learn. And then he sends them out, including Peter, the impulsive and passionate one, Thomas the skeptic, and Judas, who would betray him. (I could do a whole sermon on Jesus gathering Judas into his inner circle, knowing Judas would betray him, sending him out to minister *knowing that Judas would betray him*. Says a lot about who Jesus will accept, right?)

Jesus sends them out to do what he has been teaching *them*: to heal the sick and cast out demons, raise the dead and cleanse the lepers. Proclaim the kingdom of God and offer peace.

God’s promises to Abraham and the descendants of Abraham became a covenant, which changed and was broken and renewed many times over the years. Jesus is the new covenant in which God is with us as God was with Abraham, in which skeptics can find themselves laughing with surprise instead of unbelief; who shows us what it means to go into the world as his disciples and then sends us there, believing that we have a role in the kingdom, that we will, as descendants of Abraham, be the ones to bring the kingdom to the harassed and helpless. That we will be the shepherds to each other and to people we meet everywhere in the world. That we will remember those who pass by our church and pray for them ask God to include them in our blessings. That we will work for justice, that we will be kind, and, like Abraham, we will walk humbly with our God. Amen.