

PROMISES

“The visitors said to Abraham, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ 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. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” 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.’ But Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. He said, ‘Oh yes, you did laugh.’” **Genesis 18:9-15**

The promise is right there. Sarah can hear it. It is like the words are spoken and they hang in the air: cartoon words. Sarah can see them. She can taste them. She *knows* these words. They are the words she has been longing for her whole life. They voice the hope that has sustained her and shaped her for longer than she can remember. *She shall have a son. She shall have a son.* But Sarah is old and she knows better. A promise is all well and good, but Sarah has been through too much to be duped again. The words, they’re just words. And the person speaking them? Just a dusty traveler. It’s nice to have a promise given, but let’s be realistic, life is different than the hopes we project onto it. A promise doesn’t mean anything when it can’t come true. And perhaps the best response is simply to laugh.

Sarah is old and her life has been long. We learn first that Sarah is barren and then that she is married to Abraham, a man who hears a call that requires him to leave everything behind and follow God to some undisclosed location. Abraham, is not the only one who is called. Although God speaks directly to Abraham, Sarah is called to follow as well: you don’t call a husband without calling his wife in that culture, separation was not considered an option.

The journey is a long one and both Sarah and Abraham must have been exhausted through much of it, but their experiences were different. Abraham speaks with God, while Sarah has to pack up her life and follow her husband, without directly encountering God. Abraham has numerous encounters with God, indeed God makes a covenant with Abraham. But Sarah, Sarah seems left out of every encounter and out of every promise.

Do you remember the scene with the stars? God appears to Abraham in a dream full of vague reassurances and affirmations and Abraham confronts God: what about children? In response, God takes Abraham outside and shows him the stars: “count them if you are able. You’re descendents, they shall be more numerous than the stars.”

It’s the promise of a lifetime. Although Sarah wasn’t there, I’m guessing she about it. Abraham must have been so excited. I’ve talked to God and we’re going to have children and there are going to be so many of them and I know why we’re doing this and it’s going to be good. And and and. And Sarah must have said, “good, finally, children.”

But there are no children. Abraham and Sarah must have tried but Sarah never gets pregnant. Can you imagine?

Your husband comes home, full of a promise from God that his descendants will be more numerous than the stars. So you get busy. There are children to be had.

How many years does it take before you begin to question the promise? How long do you think it was before Sarah began to think that perhaps the promise was not for her as well? After all, she hadn't been there. God had not shown her any stars or promised her any children. She just assumed. But at some point she must have realized that she was not the only one who could give Abraham children. Perhaps the promise wasn't meant for her as well. So Sarah gives Abraham her maid and her worst fear is realized when Hagar gets pregnant. The promise must not have been for her.

Everyone gets a promise. Everyone but Sarah. Abraham is promised descendants more numerous than the stars, Hagar is promised a nation; and Sarah seems to hear silence.

And then there is today's text. It is much later in Abraham and Sarah's journey: they are both old and it has ceased to be with Sarah in the manner of women. In other words, the dream of children has passed her by, it is no longer even a possibility.

It is into this reality that a dusty traveler makes a cruel promise. At the set time, in due season, I will return and Sarah shall have a son. Who believes this promise? It is closer to a nasty joke than to a loving promise. God has been silent toward Sarah for her whole life and now God shows up and promises her the one thing she had wanted more than anything. The one thing she has spent her life getting over not having. The one thing that is no longer possible. So Sarah laughs. Laughing is the only sane response to this promise. Laughing is the only legal response.

I can identify with Abraham: I know what it's like to be called. I know what it feels like to pick up my life and leave everything comfortable behind in order to follow God to an as-of-yet undisclosed location. And I know the feeling of wonder and amazement when you stand under a sky full of stars and know that you are part of something huge, something beautiful and beyond you. I know this. This knowledge is what sits at the core of my being.

But as much as I can identify with Abraham, and as much as I know the promises, I mostly live in Sarah's world. Most of the time I find God's promises ridiculous.

We live in a broken and dirty world where waves wash out nations, where wars are waged in the name of peace, where hunger kills thousands of children every day even though the food exists in our trash cans to feed them.

We live in a world where most do not earn a living wage while the rest of us set money aside, just in case.

We live in a world where diseases spread as fast as wild fires and where health care is not guaranteed.

Don't promise me that God is present.

Don't promise me that God loves us all equally and that God is healing the world even now.

Don't promise me that one day it will be on **earth** like it is in heaven.

Because I live in this reality; and, frankly, I'm not inclined to laugh. If I had been Sarah I would have thrown food at the stranger. I would have attacked and punched and kicked and cried, 'no fair.' Don't promise me things that are not possible.

The funny thing though, the annoying thing, is that Sarah gets pregnant. We can't throw away the promises and dismiss them as ridiculous because Sarah gets pregnant. And perhaps the more amazing thing is that the text doesn't say that it was immaculate conception. So even though Sarah and Abraham were old; and even though there was *no way*, they still must have tried. And she got pregnant.

Brian Andreas, a storyteller and artist shares this story: "In my dream, the angel shrugged and said, if we fail this time, it will be a failure of imagination. And then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand."

There's no denying it. God's promises are ridiculous. They are next to impossible to imagine and laughter is a reasonable response. But as people of faith, we are called to imagine the impossible. We are called to live as if promises are true even when reality seems to suggest there is no possibility.