

**The Rev. Catherine A. Caimano**

**Proper 6A – Genesis (18:1-15, 21:1-7); Romans (5:1-8); Matthew (9:35-10:8,9-23)**

**June 15, 2008**

**St. John's Episcopal Church, Wichita, KS**

‘Oh yes, you DID laugh.’

Of all the words of God we hear, these are among my favorite. Poor Sarah – poor, bitter, tired Sarah. Old and sad and losing hope and far beyond the belief that she will ever bear children, when she and her husband Abraham are visited by three strange men, and they ever so casually mention that by this time next year, she will have a son, she is so shocked and so weary that she just laughs right out loud.

Then, when she realizes that God is part of the picture, she tries to deny it. But God gives it right back. He's not condemning her, he is practically teasing her in his gentle rebuke:

Oh yes, you DID laugh. What, you think you can pretend with GOD? You think God doesn't know what's going on in your heart? You think God doesn't keep God's promises? This is not a punishing God. This is God as a gentle Father, in an intimate exchange with his hurting, bewildered daughter.

The people who put together our lectionary, the set readings that we hear each Sunday, have given us a great gift this year – for a good part of the summer, we will be reading along with the great stories of Genesis, we will spend some time with many of the major characters of the Old Testament – two weeks ago we heard about Noah and the flood, last week was God's promise to Abraham that he will be the beginning of a great generation, and today we find Sarah having her patience tested in more ways than one.

In today's story, Sarah is having a really bad day. She's old, it's noon, it's hot, and a couple of strangers show up and Abraham wants her to make lunch. Sure, it's the Lord, but Sarah doesn't know that yet, because she just sees these men, and Abraham invites them in and tells Sarah to get busy making them a feast. And it IS her job to prepare meals, and the custom to show hospitality to passing strangers, and she quickly bakes some bread and serves them.

And it would have been enough to just accept the hospitality, But instead, one of these strange men, one of these GUYS, says something outrageous, something truly out of line. ‘In nine months, you will have a baby.’

That's not funny.

That's kind of cruel to say to a person who has been waiting her whole life for just this sort of thing, and now it is too late. It is a horrible thing to say to someone who has been so devastated by her childless state that she let her husband sleep with the maid, Hagar,

and now Hagar has a son, Ishmael, and Sarah is wracked with jealousy and regret in addition to her disappointment.

NOW she is going to have a baby? 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' she asks, with what I can imagine is just a hint of sarcasm. And she laughs. And I am betting that this is not a laugh of joy.

And how can we blame her? We have all believed in something and had it fall apart. We all know what it is like to place our trust and to have it betrayed. We know what it is like to wish and to pray and to hope for something every day and then not have it come true. We know what it is like to have everything going our way, and just then, tragedy strikes.

Of course Sarah laughed!

Shall we indeed bear children now that we are old? Shall we have marriages and careers and healing now that we have endured divorces, layoffs and illnesses? We have seen too much to believe in happy endings anymore, and so we insulate ourselves as best we can against the risk of disappointment.

We live in the real world, we fortify our lives with work and minimize our stress and our relationships and our expectations. And everything seems ok. But not quite.

Because underneath all of our busy-ness and efficiency and realistic goals there is still the part of us that longs for our wildest dreams, our deepest joy. For the answer to all of our prayers.

And the thing that gets to me, in God's rebuke to Sarah, the thing that she misses in the moment when she is all about making the meal and dealing with these strangers, is that God HAS come to her. She doesn't recognize it, it doesn't look like she hoped it would, but the truth is, just in the moment that she thinks that she is extending herself to visitors in her home, that is the moment that God is offering HER hospitality.

That is the moment when she is about to realize that we don't invite God into OUR world, God invites US into God's world. We want God to come here and explain why we don't get what we want in the real world, why we are not always strong enough to make everything work out and why earthly things break and people leave and plans collapse and dreams die. And God wants us to come to God and understand what it means to have eternal life.

Jesus gave his life so that we can be sure that Love is the strongest force in the universe, stronger than death, more substantial than all our disappointments, more beautiful than our wildest dreams, and it sits right down at our table and lets us serve. And the extent that we are willing to serve Love is the extent to which we know that nothing can separate us from it, and that there can be no tragedy in that.

But this can seem far too easy, and far too hard to believe in.

So here's the good news: You don't even have to be sure that you do believe, you just have to sit and listen. Because the deed has already been done, your life has already been paid for, and the promise has already been made. But we have to be ready to walk away from the frailty of earthly promises and listen to the surer voice of God, even if it makes us afraid.

I can't leave this job I hate because I need to pay my bills and I would have to leave the city and what would everyone think...

Oh yes, you can.

I can't fix this relationship because this problem has gone on so long and what was done is unforgivable and how will I ever trust again...

Oh yes, you can.

And what about tragedy? And illness? And random occurrences that hold us back just when we think that we are going to make it?

And I always start to think that maybe, just maybe, all the tragedy and all the disasters and all the unkept promises in this world are just the result of billions of people over thousands of years saying 'no' to the promises of God, again and again, so that we live in a world that is broken.

And then I think, that if all of us, just for a day, just for an hour, or even a minute, if all of us really believed the outrageous promises of God for just a minute, we could end hunger and warfare and disease and hatred in a second.

But...

But that's impossible. I mean, how could we get everyone to believe in the same minute? And all the different belief systems, how would we reconcile them? and what about terrorists and fundamentalists and.....

And it's gone.

Oh yes, you did laugh.

Poor tired Sarah, at the end of her hope, long past her belief in God's promises, found out at last that we only need one thing: The love of a God that is so extravagant that it wants us to have EVERYTHING. No kidding.

Nine months after the lunchtime visitors, Sarah gave birth to a baby boy, and she named him Isaac, which means, 'laughter.'

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?