

A week ago, a man murdered nearly half of a small church congregation in Sutherland Springs Texas and changed that community probably forever. I was thinking and praying a lot about that community this week. Because of the size and tight knit nature of that church, and because those events were unfolding as we were worshipping together last week, this particular horrific act felt closer to home than is comfortable. More than I have ever done after one of these events I have put myself in the place of those left behind to pick up the pieces, and how they are likely struggling to understand how to be people of faith at such a time as this.

Right now God is asking these people to do the absurd, to forgive the man that perpetuated this violence. Because forgiveness is what followers of Jesus are called to, even in moments of terribly tragedy, even when forgiveness seems ridiculous and impossible. Forgiveness after an act of evil **is** absurd, is ridiculous, is too much to ask of people. Yet, that is what Jesus asks us to do, an impossible possibility.

I hope and pray that those of us in this room will never experience such an horrific event, but I know for sure we each will experience things, good or bad which will stretch our faith past the point where we think it can go. We will live out scenarios which stretch the limits of what we think is possible for God. And in those moments sometimes we will wonder if God really can and will do what He has promised His people.

Last week J. Robert preached on God's call to Abraham to leave his country and to travel to the land that the Lord had prepared for him and his descendants. That story shows Abraham and Sarah as models of faith, people of God who stepped into what must have seemed a risky endeavor because they had confidence in the promises of God.

But this week we see those same people model something that isn't quite the confident faith we might have expected, for in these chapters of Genesis what Abraham and Sarah present us with is a model of disbelief, people that in response to an extravagant promise from God laugh with doubt.

And it is no wonder they laugh, what God is saying to them is absurd, it is unbelievable and unfathomable, most people would laugh, would doubt that what He was saying could come to pass. While this may not be the response we would hope for from pillars of faith, what Abraham and Sarah demonstrate here is the reality that sometimes God's people will doubt Him and His promises.

In the closing paragraph of his commentary on our passage for this morning Walter Brueggemann says, "*Faith is a scandal. The promise is beyond our expectation and beyond all evidence.*" Doubt is to be expected because faith is a scandal. Doubt is an understandable response to a God who works in extravagant and even absurd ways in the world, ways which challenge our expectations and suppositions and our desire to maintain a normal and understandable life.

But feeling that doubt, having those questions, experiencing that sort of fatigue doesn't mean that we should give up or walk away. What we see with Abraham and Sarah is that while it is human to doubt, that doubt is an opportunity to **engage** with God. Communicating with God in the midst of doubt provides an opportunity for Him to prepare us for things which will challenge our assumptions of what is possible and an opportunity for Him to give us hope we might not otherwise expect to experience. Hope that even in the midst of doubt gives us confidence that God does make the impossible possible.

What I hope we see this morning is that faith in Christ, in the promises of God, welcomes us to recognize that we will have doubts sometimes. We will question how God is working or if He is at all, and we will wonder how on earth we are supposed to move forward when things seem impossible.

It is how we deal with that inevitable doubt then that becomes a measure of faithfulness, because it is only through doubt confronted, engaged with and submitted to God that we can move past it, and that we can learn to embrace the incongruous ways that God may work in the world with hope, trust and confidence that whatever He promises He will do.

But first let's pray

Verse 18:12 is one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture, reading again, *12 So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"*

This is one of my favorite passages because to my mind, this verse represents one of the most human reactions to God in all of scripture, because honestly if she, or Abraham, thought about that reaction for a second they probably wouldn't have laughed would they? God's chosen people are **not** supposed to laugh in the face of His promises. But this sort of laughter, laughter that bubbles up uncontrollably is a perfectly understandable reaction, the sort of identifiable response that we can probably imagine ourselves having in the face of such a ridiculously unexpected and absurd statement.

However, while the laughter of Sarah and Abraham may be understandable, we can see that their laughter is also something else, it is a response of doubt, at some level a disbelief that God can work in the absurd way He is promising them He will, and this too is part of what I think we find identifiable in these verses, an underlying disbelief that God can and will work in ways that challenge the normal schemes of our lives.

Reading again from Brueggemann, *"For [Abraham and Sarah], the powerful promise of God outdistances their ability to receive it. Once again, this story shows what a scandal and difficulty faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. Embrace of this radical gospel requires shattering and discontinuity."*

I think we all know, on some level, that our faith expects us to be ready for the things that stretch plausibility, we know that we should aim to be ready for shattering and discontinuity and things that live outside of the normal schemes of life and perception. But being prepared for that is hard, and if we are being honest with ourselves often the promises of God will outdistance our ability to receive them, and we will find ourselves much as Sarah and Abraham did, doubting that God can do what He says He will.

As uncomfortable as it might be to think about, doubt is a reality that exists in a life of faith, sometimes we aren't going to believe the things that God has promised, there will be times when we will look at something happening in our lives and think that it is simply impossible that God might restore or redeem or bringing fulfilment to some aspect of our lives.

And doubt is okay, or it is to be expected, sometimes as involuntary as a reaction like Sarah's laughter, and sometimes as something that creeps up on us over time. But even if doubt is to be expected it is also important that we learn to engage with it properly, because there is a very fine line between doubt that can lead to greater faith, and doubt which can spiral into increasing skepticism and distance from God.

Because doubt can feel scary or shameful our tendency can be to pretend we don't feel it, isn't that what Sarah is doing when she lies and tells God she didn't in fact laugh? She is distancing herself from that laugh, from that feeling of doubt, trying to pretend, even in the face of God Himself that no, it's fine, she totally believes that she is going to have a child, just as He said.

But that's disingenuous of course, and even beyond that, who are we fooling when we maintain that we don't wonder and don't doubt sometimes that God is going to come through on His promises? We certainly aren't putting one over on God Almighty Creator of the universe. And because we can't fool God our only other alternative is to be honest about that doubt and come to Him with it.

As J. Robert said last week, we are allowed to quarrel with God, and I think doubt is part of those quarrels, it is okay to doubt, but we mustn't ignore that doubt, we must bring it to God. That is what we see Abraham doing, while Sarah laughs to herself and then lies about it Abraham laughs, but then also responds to God, engages with the ridiculous nature of the promise, and they have a dialogue in the verses following his laughter.

It is that dialogue, it is that continuous conversation and connection with God that is necessary in the face of doubt, because if we don't go to God in times of doubt we will never hope to get past that feeling.

The way we cultivate the closeness that emboldens us come to God with doubt is part of what I will be talking about in the New Year when we go pick up this sermon series with Genesis 22 and look at vulnerability as the "enabling condition" of the covenant between God and His people.

But what we see in our passage for this morning is a precursor to how Abraham responds to God asking him to sacrifice Isaac, an engagement with the God that He has an honest and open relationship with even when he may find the things that God says and promises unbelievable.

This is a model for us, when we doubt, when we question, we must cry out to God, must seek Him in that doubt, rather than allow that feeling to fester alone in our hearts. We must feel able and ready to cry out to God, as the unnamed father in Mark 9 does, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief!"

God asks and maybe even expects us to approach Him in this way, think of the story of Thomas, reading from John 20

John 20:24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

John 20:26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

John 20:28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

People are pretty hard on Thomas, but if you look at this Jesus isn't, he says *Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.* He gives Thomas the proof he is seeking so that he can move past the doubt he has and believe fully in the amazing thing that God has done in the resurrection.

We don't always need proof to counteract our doubt, and we won't always get proof, but I honestly think it is okay for us to ask, last week J Robert said, "it's ok to call on God to fulfill his promises." And I would add to that it is okay to call on God to show up when we aren't sure He will.

Now that doesn't mean He will, but even if He doesn't that isn't the end of addressing our doubt, because we can still confront it in the same way we see Sarah and Abraham do throughout their lives, which is remembering together that the promises of God are good and right and that what He has promised He will do. Because It isn't just about continuing to turn to God in times of doubt, it is also about turning to one's community of faith.

Unfortunately, I think sometimes we do a disservice to one another in the church as far as doubts or questions are concerned. When I was in seminary I went through almost a year of some real doubts about God's working in my life, and at the same time I was going through this so was another member of my cohort, and a friend of mine, Jack. Except

neither of us knew it about the other during that time because we had been similarly shamed into not talking about it by mistakenly sharing that struggle with other members of that community who received it poorly. And sadly I know that our experiences aren't unique.

Brothers and sisters, doubt and questioning is going to happen, God works in ways that often remain obscure and confusing to us, absurd ways that are beyond the norm and as J Robert preached last week will many times involve uncertainty and risk. And we must learn to give each other the space to feel those things and come alongside those who are struggling in this way even if it is a challenging experience for us.

And in time of doubt we also must encourage one another to remember that our God is great and powerful and works in amazing and unexpected ways in the world, in times where we doubt we often need to be reminded that our God may be a God of shattering and discontinuity, but all in service to His kingdom and consistent with the promises He has made to His people, who He loves.

But we also must do one more thing in the face of doubt, which is to cultivate hope, here too we see the importance of that in the model of Abraham and Sarah, quoting Brueggemann again, *"Abraham and Sarah have by this time become accustomed to their barrenness. They are resigned to their closed future. They have accepted that hopelessness as "normal." The gospel promise does not meet them in receptive hopefulness, but in resistant hopelessness."*

I truly think that hope is one of the hardest things that we do in our lives because to hope is to also sometimes be disappointed. As odd as it may be, hopelessness is often much easier and more comfortable than hope. I imagine that Abraham and Sarah were tired of hoping for a child, tired of waiting and wondering and wishing for something they wanted so much that never seemed to come. In the face of that weariness hopelessness would have seemed a relief.

We all know from experience that the greater the hope the greater the disappointment, and so to really hope for something that may not come true, or that we will never live to see come true, that is hard, it's tiring. But by that same token, hope is the only way to really believe the impossible is possible, that miracles do happen, that our God is just as great and powerful as we know Him to be. As hard as it may be, hope is what faith invites us to, it is one of the gifts that God gives us in Christ. God may ask too much of us, ask us to stretch ourselves past reason, past what we think our capacity might be, but in turn He shows up for us, and gives us hope in the meantime.

The ability to hope for God's promises to be made manifest in the world, to hope for times in which we see the impossible has been made possible means that we do and **will** not resign ourselves to a closed or constrained future, but will expect and prepare for vast possibilities that God makes manifest.

Because what happens on the other side of hope, on the other side of doubt confronted is fulfillment, the experience of a promise made as a promise kept, what happens on the other side of a laugh of doubt is another kind of laughter all together, reading from Genesis 21

Gen. 21:1 Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac (or he laughs) to the son Sarah bore him.

Gen. 21:6 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." 7 And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

There will be times in our lives where we doubt in God's promises, times when we are tired of hoping and waiting, and it is okay to feel those things, but it is not okay to rest in that place. What our God calls us to is to come to Him when we feel doubt because He knows that what He asks of us is big, is often unbelievable and even scandalous. But we can have confidence that He will meet us in that doubt, and give us the hope that we need to push through, even in the face of promises beyond our expectation and beyond all evidence.

Last week J Robert closed his sermon with a challenge to us to step out into the risk Jesus calls us to, but a challenge based in God's promises, and I quote,

Jesus calls us to follow him. And we don't know where that will take us. We don't always know what it will require except that we know it involves a willingness to give up everything to follow Christ, it involves a willingness to take up our cross daily, it involves a willingness to go where God calls us even if we're not sure where that will be.

But also with this call comes a promise, a promise that the Holy Spirit goes with us and will never leave us, a promise that God will empower us for what he calls us to do, and a promise that God will make us a blessing to those around us as we care for what he has made.

End quote

Brothers and sisters, because we can trust in the promises of God, in His presence with us, let us seek to be people that open ourselves up to the shattering and discontinuity the radical Gospel of Jesus requires, knowing and trusting that even if we may sometimes laugh in disbelief, God's promises, as absurd and extravagant as they may seem, will be fulfilled, of that there can be no doubt.