

“God’s Wonders”

When Ellisa and I were in law school, we became close friends with a law student who was about ten years older than we were. He was a third year student when we started out. He was about thirty-five years old and his wife was in her early forties (Ellis and I were in our mid-twenties). He had a great sense of humor and both he and his wife have always been fun to be around. They introduced us to our favorite Greek and pizza place in the world, Zorbas in Irmo, SC. We also used to go over to their home a lot where they gave us good home-cooked meals. They were very instrumental in convincing me that Ellisa and I were meant for each other!

They had tried for several years to have children with no success. She was forty-two and was told it was unlikely that she would every get pregnant. Fertility treatments were not an option. They kept trying, not giving up. Then one summer after our second year of law school, Ellisa called me and told me that our friend’s wife was pregnant. A miracle! The pregnancy went fine and a beautiful daughter was born. Their oldest daughter is now thirty-four and has worked for several years as a school teacher in the Lexington School district number five. They then had another daughter two years later. She ended up going to the Citadel, joined the

navy, and sailed on ships for a while. She is now married and lives in the Washington, DC area.

Today our scripture text is from Genesis 18:1-15 and 21:1-7. It is the story of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is no longer menstruating. They have not had any children together. Sarah has been under considerable pressure due to God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many. How could that be when they were so old and she barren?

Abraham and Sarah receive a visit from three visitors. Abraham exercises hospitality towards them. Abraham immediately recognizes one of the visitors as singular, addressing him as "my lord." But Abraham sees three men and he also addresses them in the plural. Some theologians naturally ponder a connection between the three-person epiphany and our doctrine of the Trinity. Jewish readers typically say that God sends angels to visit the patriarch.

Abraham calls one the visitors "Lord." They ask "Where's your wife Sarah?" Then one of the men said, "I will definitely return to you about this time next year. Then your wife Sarah will have a son." Sarah, concealed in the tent, laughs to herself---a little too loudly. The Lord calls Abraham to account for Sarah's behavior. It is unclear whether Sarah has emerged into public view, but she speaks for herself and denies her laughter.

Sarah has a reason to be suspicious. She has a reason to be bitter. When Abraham received the divine promise, she was among those who left her familiar country and ventured to a yet-to-be-revealed land. The plan fell apart immediately; famine drove Abraham and his household to Egypt, where he passed Sarah off his sister and allowed Pharaoh to take her for himself (Genesis 12:10-20). Sarah was not present when God reinforced the promise to Abraham, but Abraham did not resist her plan to give him the enslaved Hagar as a potential breeding partner. Sarah came to regret her plan to use Hagar. No wonder she laughed when she was told she would have a child in her condition.

Sarah's laughter has traditionally been read an expression of bitter irony; having once believed in her promise, she now ridicules it. In this reading, Sarah comes off as failing in faith; she does not recognize the visitors; divine status, and she has given up hope for her blessing.

Do we give up hope in God working in our lives? Do we let what we perceive as unanswered prayers or inactions by God to cause us to become bitter? Writing about this passage, Doug Carey, professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, writes that he suspects this story was composed for two primary reasons; to reinforce God's faithfulness in the promise to Abraham and Sarah, and to affirm Israel's enduring covenant with the

faithful God. Indeed, Sarah will give birth to Isaac, whose son Jacob/Israel will prove ancestor to the entire nation.

We have to continue to believe in God's promises even when we think God is not listening. In Matthew 25, we are told that when we encounter a stranger who is hungry, or thirsty or naked, and we help them, it is as if we did these things for Christ. He says when you have cared for the least of your brothers and sisters, you have done it for Christ. I recently finished reading a book by Rev. Deb Richardson-Moore, who is the pastor at Triune Mercy Center in Greenville, South Carolina. Several of you visited Triune with me in 2016. Triune is a church which also serves as a ministry to provide food, clothing, counselling and various services to the homeless or those living in squalid conditions. Most of these people are either drug addicts or mentally ill. Several have criminal records.

Rev. Moore relates her experiences over several years. There were many times she could have become frustrated and given up. Many times money, time and effort were put into helping someone, and it looked like they had turned a corner. Sadly, most fell back into drug use, and some even died because of their inability to stay clean. At the same time, there were success stories. One man eventually became the supervisor of facilities at Bumcombe Street UMC.

What I concluded from the book was that Rev. Moore ultimately had to put her faith in God that God would be in control. It was not up to her to make sure that everyone always ended up okay. It was just up to her to welcome the stranger and help out the stranger. Then let God do the work. We are His agents on earth.

We must remember what God has promised us. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we have been promised he will comfort us. The Spirit will guide us. The Spirit gives us the wisdom we need. The Spirit allocates gifts and talents among us so we can work together. We need to keep these promises in mind when we become frustrated.

And it's understandable how one can become frustrated today. We have been going through a COVID-19 pandemic for three months which has disrupted our lives like never before. We do not know when this pandemic will go away. Our freedom of movement has been limited. We realize that some things which we value and cherish may never be the same again. Then, for the last three weeks, massive protests have erupted over the killing of George Floyd. We do not know what these protests will bring. Recent polls show that 80% of Americans believe the country is out of control. Even if you have been able to keep your job, your income, and put food on the table, you have still been under a tremendous amount of stress.

So, like Sarah who had been through much because of God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, we at times might laugh when we are told things are going to be alright. But we must remember that God keeps his promises to us. Some of us may go on with our lives and do our work without laughter. Others of us may laugh. Some may laugh and hide their laughter. To all these responses God remains present and faithful.

As we close today, let us meditate on God's wonders. Think of the wonder of creation. Think of the wonder of a baby being born and the complexity of the human body. Let us think of all that God has done and will do. Recall the words of Paul to the Romans in Romans 8:28, "We know that God works all things together for the ones who love God, who are called according to his own purpose." What a wonderful promise to rely on.