

## “Unraveled: Unexpected Joy and Surprise”

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

“Houston, we have a problem!” These are the famous words from the movie “Apollo 13”, where the crew of the moon space shuttle reported a major technical problem back to earth. There was a problem with the oxygen tanks on their spacecraft. The crew had to work with NASA to overcome several obstacles before getting home safely. That phrase expressed a tense moment when all the work and all the plans seemed to fall apart. And so the phrase became synonymous with when plans fall apart or when life unravels. As we begin this new sermon series, we are reminded of the importance of faith as a guide in those times when we find ourselves saying, “Houston, we have a problem!”

In fact, this very sermon series was supposed to be a major coming together experience for us as a congregation. When I planned this back in the summer of 2019, I imagined special church decorations, small groups study, and in-person discussion during worship. I also had no idea that we would be experiencing some major unraveling of our plans, our world, and our society. Yet, here we are asking some very basic questions about life and about how to move forward.

Today, we focus on the surprising joy and laughter we have found during the two global and national crises we are living through: the pandemic and racism.

Today we look at the story of Sarah receiving unexpected news that was so absurd that it made her laugh. Today's Bible story is about a couple who were invited again and again to let go of their certainties, expectations, comforts, and routines in order to let the presence of God blossom in their lives. The couple had taken the journey to which God invited them. They left their home and sought-after God's vision for their lives. They had received the promises of God about having many children, but many years had passed (about 24 years) and nothing had happened. The promises seemed so far away and even forgotten at that point in their lives. Abraham and Sarah grew weary of waiting and devised another plan. They arranged for Abraham to have a child with Sarah's slave, Hagar. They tried hard to make the promise come true. After all, they were in their nineties and the promise seemed so impossible. The dream of their lives had been put on hold for so many years that it seemed impossible!

The location of the story is important: The Oaks of Mamre in the city of Hebron (Genesis 13:18). This was the place where Abraham built an altar after his nephew's (Lot) departure. So this was already marked as a sacred space by Abraham. As the guests appear on the scene, Abraham provides them exceptional hospitality as this was the custom of the land. One was to host the strangers in order to preserve their lives. Abraham not only hosts the strangers, but he also provides them with the best meal that he could offer. The strangers, whom we as the readers know to be the Lord, remind Abraham of the old promise of a child for Sarah. But as she overhears this, Sarah laughs at the thought of getting pregnant at her age! She had waited so long to be pregnant and had given up hope. In a patriarchal culture that valued women only for their ability to have children, Sarah was especially hopeless and learned to just live with the pain of her life. But these strangers persist and say, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" At that point,

Abraham and Sarah had given up hope and here these strangers were challenging their faith. Abraham and Sarah had taken a long journey away from home based on God's call to them, but their faith had settled into a comfortable zone of realism about what to expect in life. They also were not all that faithful to God all the time. Sarah abused her slave. Abraham lied to Pharaoh pretending that Sarah was his sister so that he would gain Pharaoh's favor. The fulfillment of the promise was not because of Abraham and Sarah's faithfulness. It was because of God's unconditional love. When Sarah finally gives birth to her child, she names him "Isaac" which means laughter in Hebrew. She remembers that moment by the Oaks of Mamre when God turned her bitterness into laughter. And so confronted with the question about their faith, Abraham and Sarah had to make a choice: To believe in the realism of their experience of hardships and barrenness or to defy logic and follow the word of the Lord. The story is left unresolved. Sarah denied laughing and the strangers leave without an answer! God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is fulfilled later despite their doubt and lack of faith. As a result, at the birth of Isaac, Sarah laughs again. The whole thing seemed so illogical and the only proper response this time is laughter and joy.

Faith does not always add up! In fact, one of the indicators that God is the one guiding you in times of trouble is that when you find yourself chuckling and saying, "This can't be!" or "It is impossible." Faith is about trusting God when life unravels, and our illusion of control is gone. During this pandemic and racial unrest, we are invited to see where God is surprising us with joy.

Author and pastor Rob Bell shares an insight from Franciscan priest Richard Rohr who once pointed out that "Native Americans have a tradition of leaving a blemish in one corner of the rug they are weaving because they believe that's where the spirit enters...I can relate to the rugs. I want desperately for things to go 'how they're supposed to.' Which is another way of saying 'how I want them to,' which is another way of saying 'according to my plan.' And that, as we all know, isn't how it works. But it's in that disappointment, in that confusion, in that pain --the pain that comes from things not going how I wanted them to-- that I find the same thing happening, again and again. I come to the end of myself, to the end of my power, the end of my strength, the end of my understanding, only to find, in that place of powerlessness, a strength and peace that weren't there before. I keep discovering that it's in the blemish that the Spirit enters. The cross, it turns out, is about the mysterious work of God, which begins not with big plans and carefully laid out timetables but in pain and anguish and death.

It's there, in the agony of those moments, that we get the first glimpses of just what it looks like for God to take all of our trauma and hurt and disappointment, all those fragments lying there on the ground, and turn them into something else, something new, something we never would have been able to create on our own. It's in that place that we're reminded that true life comes when we're willing to admit that we've reached the end of ourselves, we've given up, we've let go, we're willing to die to all of our desires to figure it out and be in control.

We are going to suffer. And it is going to shape us. Somehow. We will become bitter or better, closed or open, more ignorant or more aware. We will become more or less tuned in to the thousands upon thousands of gifts we are surrounded with every single moment of every single day. This too will shape me. The only question left is, how?"

As we ponder the unraveling of what we knew and the laughter of Sarah in the face of what seemed impossible, I invite you to reflect on what has surprised you during our current challenges. How has God brought you and our world laughter and joy in the midst of this time of deep pain? Send me your reactions, thoughts, and experiences. We will put those as part of the unraveled art here which we can share each week.

We will end with an affirmation of faith which we will use each week. It is written by Sarah Are.

#### AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

I believe in God, the Great Sewer-  
Who weaves us together in community,  
Collecting our loose ends and turning them into belonging.

I believe in the Holy Spirit --  
Who hems us in before and behind,  
Catching us when we fall and writing us into God's holy narrative.

And I believe in Jesus Christ --  
Who loved and claimed the people society had thrown out, refusing to disregard anyone as scrap.

I believe God has woven part of God's self into the fiber of our being,  
Making us inherently worthy of love and belonging.

I believe the fabric of my life is weak,  
That I am prone to error and need Gods handiwork to remind me of love.

I believe in the Church, and that like a quilt of different fabrics,  
She is designed to be as diverse and beautiful as God's creation.

And I believe that when life unravels,  
God is there to stitch my wounds together,  
To hold me in the palm of God's hand, to tell me of love,  
And to invite me into a new journey. Amen.