

## **Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7**

I laughed. Well, wouldn't you? I was so tired of words and empty promises while my womb was still painfully empty, and my arms held no child. In the beginning, when God first told Abraham that we were to have this huge family, I was excited. Daunted, but excited. I could cope with four, seven, or even twelve.

Now twenty would be more of a challenge, but I was ready for it all. We had heard God, and we would step up to the challenge.

And even in those early days, I was dying to have a baby. All I have ever wanted was to nurture a child, shape another life. So in those first few months, I hoped: Each month, I focussed on any feeling of nausea, any unusual sensation in my body.

I watched all my friends and neighbours around me, left, right and centre, all bearing children, and I listened as they shared their stories. As my childhood friends conceived, one after another, as their families grew, I waited for my story to follow theirs. But it didn't.

Each month, I bled, and told myself not to be disappointed: it would happen next month. Then the months went by, turning into years, and I wondered if we had heard right. Maybe Abraham was mistaken.

Then I wondered if it was my fault, if I had done something wrong, and was being punished. I kept going over my life, looking for things I might have done, and prayed long prayers of blanket repentance.

Of course, everyone had an explanation for why it wasn't happening. I was given potions, advice on strange techniques, even told to abandon YHWH, and start worshipping a fertility god like any normal person. Maybe we had made a mistake?

Maybe YHWH wasn't real –maybe we should throw in our lot with the fertility gods? After all, if God couldn't even give us a child, couldn't keep this one promise He had made us, there didn't seem much point in forever traipsing around the countryside searching for a home.

I can't remember the exact moment when I gave up hope. I hung on for a good few years. I became angry with God. Then, eventually, my anger subsided, replaced by disillusionment. And every month, we had the relentless rhythm of hope, disappointment ... hope, disappointment ... hope, disappointment.

Eventually, I disciplined myself to stop even thinking about it. I began to accept that it wasn't going to happen. I tried to understand. God hadn't meant for me to become a mother, after all. We had misunderstood God's purpose. We would produce a family through Hagar, my Egyptian maid.

And really, I thought I would be all right with it. By then, I had made my peace with infertility. I had friends, nephews and nieces. It wasn't like I'd be alone. But then – *Hagar* – having the very thing I had wanted, and Abraham looking all proud and pleased ... I couldn't even bear to look at her. Every time she held that child in her arms I thought of the child that should be in my arms, the child I was

promised. God had lied to me.

So when I overheard the messengers from the Lord saying with such carefree confidence, “Oh, she’ll have a son next year”, I laughed. Standing there, in the tent, flour on my hands, I felt a white rage pushing up in my chest.

There used to be a time when a comment like that would have floored me, left me reeling for days, sobbing and crying at the broken promises. But I was beyond that now.

I laughed, but I wanted to punch someone. I wanted to say to God’s messenger, “You have a pretty sick sense of humour. It has been too long. It’s over. You can’t just keep promising things when we both know it is never going to happen. Stop lying to me.”

And then – the messenger beckoned me over, and looked me in the eyes. I felt like a small child before him: there was something about his demeanour that reminded me of my mother – a gentleness, deep love and power.

And in his presence, my anger fell away, and I had a peculiar sense of being utterly known. I felt spiritually undressed. He gave the smallest of smiles to me, and turned to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh?... Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

I felt myself wanting to cry, and not knowing why. He knew me. He knew what I was thinking. I had nowhere to hide. And then the thought came to me: “What if it is real this time?” Just minutes

before I had been hating him, resenting him, defying him, quietly and privately.

What if he was actually going to bless us with a child, and I had ruined it, because I couldn't wait any longer? Suddenly, I was afraid. I hadn't been afraid before. Now I was afraid of losing something, even though I didn't yet have it. So I lied. Well, wouldn't you?

"No, I didn't laugh", I said. I said it with as much bravado as I could muster. He had transformed this old lady into an eight-year-old girl again, stealing raisin cakes from her mother. "Yes, you did laugh", he said, and I saw love in his eyes, and in my heart, I wept - with shame, with joy, and with a renewed faith.

Some of you may be familiar with "The Princess Bride" — a child's fairytale about a beautiful princess who falls in love with a handsome young man but before they can get married the beautiful princess is kidnapped by a scheming, bald little man and his two friends, the slow but good-hearted giant and the Italian sword fighter. And while these kidnappers are trying to get away, the bald little man keeps saying his favourite word, "Inconceivable!"

And every time he says it we laugh, why? Because every time he thinks something is "absolutely, totally, and in every other way completely inconceivable", it actually happens. But when God makes a promise to Sarah and Sarah says: (if you'll pardon a terrible pun), "Inconceivable!", we didn't laugh. Why not? Because she was right.

In fact, Sarah did laugh, and Abraham laughed, they laughed

because the thing God promised was hopelessly impossible. Sarah laughed, because at the age of 90 she had long ago finished crying. How many years was it? Probably not long after they were married she began to worry that something was wrong.

Month after month, year after year she and Abraham loved and were loved and in the morning she would wonder, “ Could it be that God is answering our prayers? Maybe this year (just maybe) God’s promise will come true. Perhaps now is the time when I will bear the promised child.”

But it never was. And then came midlife and Sarah didn’t wonder any more. She knew then that she would never have a son, and she would go about her work as usual as if nothing were the matter, but inside she was crying. And sometimes, if you looked closely, you might notice her eyes filling with tears. But those days were long past. Sarah didn’t cry anymore. So when the Lord came again to renew the promise that she would have a son, Sarah only laughed. Actually, the previous chapter tells us that Abraham laughed too, only he covered up a little better, so that he said one thing to God while he was saying something else to himself.

Sarah and Abraham laughed because God’s timing was all off. It is something like having a big party and you want to put on some special music, so you look for your favourite recording, and even though you search for it all evening you can’t remember where you put it. And then finally you find it - but it is too late because the party is over and everyone has gone home. “There’s no point in playing that music now, Lord. Don’t bother. We don’t need any more

promises now. Can't you see? It's too late. After all, Abraham is 99. Sarah is 90.

"Enough already with your promises, Lord. The party is over."  
"Besides", says Abraham, "we made do with what we had. We found other music. Look! Take Ishmael here! Isn't he a fine young man?"  
Mind you, he wasn't quite what we had hoped for, but we learned to live with less.

After a while we got used to it and it wasn't so bad. "At our age, Lord, we're too old to start something new. Life hasn't been everything we hoped for, but let's just say 'That's how life is, sometimes,' and let it go at that."

All this does not mean that Abraham and Sarah had lost their faith in God. In fact, we are clearly told that Abraham had a very close relationship with God. So close, in fact, that God appeared to him and asked him and all other males to be circumcised as a SIGN of that close relationship — that bond — that covenant between them.

And, at the age of 99, Abraham obeyed. This was no shallow faith. Abraham was a *firm* believer in God. Long ago he had committed himself to walking with God in obedience, for the rest of his life. That commitment still stood. Sarah also had faith. After she laughed, the Lord challenged her, "Why did you laugh? IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR THE LORD?"

The way the question is asked makes the answer obvious, (and Sarah would agree) NO, OF COURSE NOT. Nothing is too hard.

God can do anything. Abraham and Sarah *believed that*. But after a lifetime of disappointment, a lifetime of barrenness they laughed and denied laughing.

Our scene changes.

We move now to another time altogether, and another house. As we get closer, we hear all kinds of excitement. Everyone is laughing and talking and trying to listen all at once. Were you there when. . .? Don't you remember. . .When did you see him. . .? That's amazing! Who told you first. . .? I still can't believe it! Everyone is sharing the excitement except one person.

Thomas is sitting off to the side, looking awfully depressed. He has good reason to feel that way — his best friend died just a few days ago. Now there are few things worse than feeling really “down” while everyone else is enjoying the party. So, while others celebrate, he gets even more depressed, until finally he can't stand it any longer, and he bursts out, “How can you all be so happy? Have you no idea what's going on? Get in touch with reality, guys! He's dead! ... Can't you understand that?”

And the others said, “No, he's not dead. We saw him. He's alive! He was here!” And Thomas said, “I doubt it.” In our society we learn early in life to be skeptical. We tell our children, Don't believe everything you hear or see or read. Just because you read it in a magazine or on the internet doesn't make it true. And never buy anything from someone who says “This special price is effective only tonight.”

But this *is not*, the kind of doubt Thomas experienced. Yes, Thomas doubted, but he was not a skeptic. Thomas *believed* in Jesus. He had left everything to follow him. When many others decided to leave, Thomas stayed, and when Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you want to go too?”

Thomas agreed with Peter, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of life. We *believe* and *know* that you are the holy One of God.” Thomas believed, and that was why his despair was so deep when it all ended on the cross. Thomas’s doubt came from a strong faith that had been shaken at its very core - smashed into pieces by an insane trial and a death that mocked everything that was fair and just. And when Jesus cried, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Thomas felt forsaken too. Thomas believed, and doubted.

There is still another time, and another house.

A house where a crowd of people is coming together, laughing and waving, shaking hands and hugging. And singing. Yes, singing! And the song goes: “Standing, standing! I’m standing on the promises of God!” But, there’s an Abraham in church who, even as he sings the words, imagines what Tevye, the old man in *Fiddler on the Roof* might think? “OF COURSE God can! But He doesn’t, does he? So how is that supposed to help me?”

And then the pastor prays, “Our loving heavenly Father” ...

And a teenage daughter or son tries hard but cannot imagine what a loving father would be like because, last night, dad was abusive



again. And then there's another song, "Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see!" And the Abrahams and the Sarahs and the Thomases sing along with the rest, but they know they can't make that big payment on Thursday. They know they failed their midterm exam. And their thoughts turn once again to their aging parents, their youngest child, or a distant friend.

And by now we know who the Abrahams and the Sarahs and the Thomases are. They are all of us! Our name is Sarah, for we too live with barrenness, and wonder why God has not heard our prayers! Our name is Abraham, for we too have made our deals with life, our little compromises.

We too have learned to live with less and to be satisfied with Ishmaels. Our name is Thomas, for who is there among us who has not felt a crushing loss or disappointment? And yet ... and yet, we believe. Yes! We believe!

But when we think again about our barrenness we doubt and laugh and deny laughing. We hear God's promise, and we see our lives and they don't fit. How can we possibly hold them together, when they stand so far apart? And so we ask ourselves, After a lifetime of barrenness, is there still hope? After three days of death, can there be new life? And we answer, with that poor father of the gospels, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!"

The miracle, of course, is that even though Abraham and Sarah were old, even though she was barren, and even though they laughed, and denied laughing, a year later God visited them, and

they had a son! The miracle is that even though Thomas doubted, and even though he declared his doubt with all the anger and pain of a shattered faith, a week later Jesus came to him, and showed him his hands and side.

The miracle is that in spite of all the evidence that points otherwise, in spite of all our laughs and denials, bargains or doubts, in a little while Christ will come to us and in him all God's promises will be "Yes!" fulfilled beyond our highest dreams and deepest prayers. And then we will bow, and worship, and with all the other Abrahams and Sarahs and Thomases, cry out, "My Lord and my God."

**Amen.**

## PRAYERS FOR PENTECOST 16 - SEPTEMBER 17, 2023

We bring our petitions of praise and thanksgiving as well as our prayers for the world, all Creation, and all people and situations in need of God's mercy, compassion and justice, trusting that God hears and knows our yearnings and our dreams and will use all things towards good according to God's eternal purposes.

*Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?  
And why are you so disquieted within me? – Psalm 42:6*

Oh God, sometimes we lose our perspective of how to live our days with hope and confidence when we are bombarded with all the things happening in our world that seem to show that there is so much sorrow and so many things to grieve in our world. Help us, O God, as we weep for all the suffering surrounding us. Help us to not lose confidence in your eternal ways, in your power to overcome evil, in your vision of a world where all will be able to experience wholeness and well being, justice and freedom. As your beloved people help us to remain steadfast in our trust in you and the promises you have given us. Open our eyes to see your handiwork all around us. Remind us through your living Word and the actions of others that you are the almighty and eternal God whose love for all people is everlasting and that you are the Creator of all that is good.

Even as we live in the world as it is, we yearn for the world as you envision it, dear God. Today, we pray for: the people of Morocco who experienced a powerful earthquake this week the effects of which are yet to be fully known, but which already has resulted in a death toll of nearly three thousand people, thousands more incurring injuries, and countless displaced from their homes; for Libya and all her people, as they continue to search for more than ten thousand dead or missing people after massive amounts of rainfall caused destruction to the dams outside Derna. Reports of more than eleven thousand people reported dead, with over thirty thousand more left homeless and in unsafe conditions is hard for us to envision or comprehend. We pray

for the people of Brazil who experienced heavy rains and floods in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, causing the death of over thirty people. We grieve for lives lost, communities ripped apart or destroyed by these natural disasters. We pray that emergency aid and ongoing support be made available to help with the massive work ahead.

O God, we pray for the people of Nova Scotia and the east coast as they take stock of after effects of Hurricane Lee. Mother of earth, water, and sky: You are with every living being impacted by these natural disasters. Infuse the survivors with strength and courage, for their journey will be long and hard. Cradle those who grieve the loss of their loved ones, homes, and freedom. Shine light perpetual upon those who have died.

O God, we mourn the loss of lives of women who were murdered by the hands of someone they loved. We grow weary as we watch the rate of domestic violence rise worldwide. So very weary. We pray for the deaths of women murdered by intimate partners that too frequently occur and make the news. We realize with sorrow that for every named victim of domestic violence there are thousands of unnamed victims of violence. We pray for all the missing and murdered women and children across Canada. Mighty Protector, shield us from the violence that is swirling around us. Guard the most vulnerable and guide potential victims to safety and the support they need. Open our eyes to see the truth of domestic violence. Lead us to speak the truth, holding aggressors and perpetrators of domestic violence responsible for their actions. Bring healing about for both victims and perpetrators of violence in our quest for a peaceful life for all.

O God, we remember the twenty-six people, mostly women and children, who died when a boat carrying more than one hundred farmers capsized in north-central Nigeria, the region's second boat tragedy in three months. We pray for the families and the community which experienced a school shooting in Louisiana, leaving one person dead, two others injured and a suspected shooter, a juvenile in

custody. Bring healing to these families and those who love them.

We pray to you Almighty God, in this time of raging wildfires. You are our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Do not let us fail in the face of these events. Uphold us with your love and give us the strength we need. Help us in our confusion and guide our actions. Heal the hurt, console the bereaved and afflicted, protect the innocent and helpless, and deliver any who are still in peril; for the sake of your great mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord.

O God, we pray for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders in our BC Synod and in our ELCIC. We pray for the congregations and pastors of Saint Paul's, Prince Rupert- Rev. Diana Edis and Our Saviour Lutheran, Richmond - Rev. Christoph Reiners. We pray for all the delegates attending the Lutheran World Federation, delegates representing 99 countries and 150 member churches as they work together to further your vision for your creation.

O God, we pray for own congregation, that you help us to envision dreams and discern the future you are preparing for us. Help us to act upon them with your love and guidance as we together bring them to fruition. We pray for those we name in our hearts or aloud who are lonely, suffering physically, mentally, socially. We pray for those struggling with substance abuse and their families; those undergoing treatments or recuperating from surgeries as well as for the doctors, nurses, and therapists that care for them.

O God, to the one who weeps with us: Invite us to rest in the knowledge that we will never have the answers to most things, but that you are present in all circumstances. Protect our hearts from completely breaking open from the heavy weight of burdens and sorrows of we bear. So, fill us with your Spirit, we pray, that we will see with your eyes, feel with your heart, and act with your courage and compassion for the welfare of all those who are in need. In the words of German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *“Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”* Hold us in your loving arms

during the scariest of moments and whisper the words we long to hear, “You are my beloved. I will never leave you. My peace I give to you. Be still and know that I am God”.

Into your hands, gracious God of justice and peace, of hope and compassion, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your everlasting mercy and grace.

**Amen**

Together, let us pray the Lord’s Prayer, as adapted from the New Zealand Book of Prayer:

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of Your name echoes through the universe! The way of Your justice be followed by all the peoples of the world! You heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your beloved community of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and test, strengthen us. From trials too great to endure, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For You reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

**Amen.**