

St. Paul's Congregational Church
February 25, 2018 – Lent 2B
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8: 31 – 38
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

A few years ago the Glen Ridge church began a relationship with an orphanage in Haiti – we sent a number of people there on mission trips – to an area in Haiti where the poorest of the poor families brought their children to the orphanage in hope of a better life. Desperate poverty around them, but a beacon of light, of hope, in this place.

One of our confirmands spent her week of school vacation there – and I won't forget the confirmation class we had following her return. The confirmands asked her about the place, the orphanage, what she did – what it was like there. She talked about the guest house where she stayed and told them that by Haitian standards it was really quite luxurious. Did they have showers? Yes – but the water was always cold. If you waited until night it was a little better but first thing in the morning it was really cold. No, there wasn't really enough electricity to plug in multiple hair dryers but at least they always had electricity this time. No, no air conditioning but this trip it wasn't as hot as it had been sometimes.

She told about taking all those pairs of shoes people of the church donated – about children playing soccer either barefoot or in flip flops, sometimes using rocks as their balls. And she talked about the suitcase full of legos they took with them and what joy the children felt playing with them. She went on to say that life is pretty basic there – and to experience that brings a deep sense of joy and satisfaction. Watching her talk, watching her facial expression, the light in her eyes, was very special.

It occurred to me that maybe that's one of the gifts and indeed, one of the challenges of Lent: getting back to basics. We all don't get the opportunity to spend a week doing that in one of the poorest countries on the planet where we don't have a choice – but the season of Lent is a

time when we are again offered the challenge, the opportunity, of getting back to basics, wherever we spend our days, amidst all the blessings we have – stuff, shoes, real soccer balls, warm homes – cool in the summer, plenty of food, educational opportunities.

Maybe some of us have changed our daily routine a bit during Lent – walking to work, eating differently, serving others in special ways, meditation: all in an effort to observe this season of repentance, of opening ourselves more clearly to the path of discipleship.

Maybe back to basics involves remembering – remembering the covenant promises God has made to all of us, God's people. This morning we are going back basics in a sense, back to our own faith story: the story of our very beginnings as people of God: the story of Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham: a man of faith – when he was ninety nine years old and his wife Sarah – 90 years old. What they had wanted most was a child. And now imagine hearing someone say you will bear a child, and through the child you will produce many descendants – kings and rules will come from you, and the land you now live in as strangers will belong to your descendants.

Seems a little crazy, doesn't it? Some things are difficult to believe. Some promises are hard to trust. Even Abraham, the man of faith, laughed when he heard God promise him a child; even he doubted. It's not really possible! And Sarah laughed too.

How often are we like Abraham and Sarah? How often do we disbelieve, even laugh at what God has said to us? How often, despite our best intentions, do we doubt God's promises?

Probably more often than we'd like to admit.

Maybe we do it every time we pray to God for our daily bread, but fail to pray for bread for those in Africa, in Haiti, even our neighbors close to home served by our Food Banks. Give US this day our daily bread includes everyone, not just ourselves.

Maybe we do it every time we ask God to help us to forgive someone else, but fail to ask God to help bring peace to countries at war. As we forgive OTHERS includes everyone.

Maybe it's easier to trust God for the things that we have some control over, but it is harder to trust God for the things that we can't control, for the things that we can't do anything about ourselves.

Maybe it's easier to trust God for things we think possible, but harder to trust God for things we think are impossible.

When we trust God for our daily bread, in the back of our minds we already know how God will feed us; we know that if we go to work we will be able to bring home a paycheck. And we know that if we ask God to help us forgive someone, that it will most likely happen if we call that person and try to talk to them.

But food for Africa, for Haiti, for our neighbors - we don't see how it is possible, just as the disciples couldn't see how it was possible to feed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish; nor can we see how war might cease between the nations, just as many of the Pharisees could not see how it was possible for God to love sinners. So maybe we don't ask God to do the impossible, or if we do, we don't really expect God to do it. Maybe we look to God to do those only those things and to bless only those things that we can imagine. But God's power is so beyond our imagination.

Is that how it was with Abraham? From the very beginning of his faith journey, he trusted God, and he did what he believed God wanted him to do, even when it was hard; even when he had to leave his own country and his own family. From the very beginning of Abraham's faith journey he believed that God was going to give him a son, and through that child's children and their children and their children in turn, God was going to bless the world, and that he was going to make the name of Abraham great. And when Abraham saw he could do something to make the divine promises come true, he did that as well.

Abraham was a man of faith. As the Bible tells us, he is father of all those who have faith today, the spiritual ancestor of all those who not only wish to see the promises of God come true, but who are also willing to work to make them come true. We are all children of Abraham.

But for all that, Abraham, like so many of us, trusted God more easily when he could see how God was going to do what God has

promised to do. That's the way it is, isn't it. Although they lived four thousand years ago, Abraham and Sarah were like us, and we as people of faith, are like them.

Like them, we believe in God. Like them we get caught up in our own understandings of how things work, rather than on the wisdom of God, of the possibilities of God. Like them we sincerely want to trust in God, but there are times when we really can't see those possibilities God has in store. And like them, maybe we tend to laugh at the idea that God will do anything out of the ordinary.

Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself: "Will a child be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And we hear the story of Sarah laughing too.

How are those questions different than the ones we so often ask when we can't see the wisdom, the possibilities of God?

How are they different than the statements we so often make?

I can't do that - I'm not strong enough, I'm not wise enough, I'm not good enough. I'm too shy. I don't have enough money. I couldn't possibly teach Sunday School, serve on a committee, go somewhere new, give up whatever to go where God calls me.

Or when we say: That won't work - we tried it before, no one cares, government policy will not permit it, the rules can't be changed.

Some things are tough to believe, and some promises are hard to trust in, even if we already believe in much of what God has said, and already trust in many other promises that God has made.

The wonderful thing about Abraham and Sarah, is that even though they left God out of their equation when they laughed and said to themselves that it was impossible to have a child at that late stage in their lives, even though a significant part of them doubted God, a larger part of them trusted in God's promises and believed that God had the power to do in them what God had promised to do.

As St. Paul writes, Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed. Without weakening in his faith he faced the fact that he was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old -and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,

being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.... And so he became the father of many nations and he was considered by God to be righteous.

Some things are hard to believe, and some promises are hard to trust, but if we trust God anyway, if we believe the promises to us despite their fantastic nature, then even if part of us laughs, and part of us doubts, we will be what God meant us to be, and God's blessings will abide with us as they did with Abraham and Sarah. As those blessings abide with people we know today.

We're getting a hint and a challenge, though, from those high school students in Florida – aren't we, that nothing is impossible for those who believe.

Xavier Ross is on our prayer list – he was born with half a heart – first surgery took place when he was 2 days old. He's 6 now – fragile for sure – in and out of the hospital with life threatening infections – he's home now, even going to kindergarten but he'll always be at risk. His mother, Jackie, ends almost every post updating on Xavier, with a simple statement, "I believe." Even after being with Xavier for 5 months in the hospital, after his being in and out of ICU, after complication after complication, Jackie's faith is strong. Oh yes, there's the unspeakable pain of watching and worrying over this 6 year old little boy – but through it all, his parents believe! And they say it out loud for all to hear! Such a breathtaking testimony.

When Father Marc saw so many boys in Haiti struggling to survive, he had a vision of Espwa – Project Hope – years later over 500 children have the promise of a future – and one of the poorest countries on this planet has the promise, the hope, of children educated in ways to make Haitian life better.

God's blessings abide with the Ross family, with Father Marc, with the children and youth of Espwa – the Creole word for hope. And they abide with us too – even if part of us laughs, even if part of us doubts.

In Christ God has promised us so much: God holds before us not just forgiveness of our sins, and life everlasting, but God offers as well a full and rich life here and now, a life where we can do what we think is

impossible for us to do, and where our brothers and sisters and we ourselves can be what we thought they could never be.

People of faith, remember that God is in the equation, that God loves you, and God loves this world, and wants the best for it, for each of us. Against all hope, in hope believe. Trust God's promises. Trust God's presence. God's covenant is for us too. Let's get back to basics. Put God into all the impossible situations in your lives, in what we might think are impossible situations in our life together as the community of St. Paul's Congregational Church, and God's power will be set loose in you, and the laughter of doubt will be turned into the laughter of joy.

So may it be. Amen.