

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old...”
A Sermon for Monroe Community Church, UCC
Monroe, Maine

Sunday, February 25, 2018

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Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Romans 4:13-25 & Mark 8:31-38

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”...

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. Romans 4:13-25

Will you pray with me. God of holy surprises, remind us again this day that we are never too old to receive new knowledge, new insights into life and death, new ways to look into *your* crystal ball and see *our own* reflections. Amen.

The second Sunday of Lent is a good day to think about promises and surprise. First, there's Abram, who was OLD.... I mean REALLY old.... And Sarai who was no “spring chicken” herself. This married couple had to be thinking more about which one of them was going to be left alone when the other one died.... than what they would name a new baby! Don't you think? Our text from Genesis for today is full of surprises – not only for Abram and Sarai who would be renamed Abraham and Sarah and become the “ancestor[s] of a multitude of nations.” (Gen 17:3, 5)

This text is full of surprises for us, too, if we dare to bear witness to them. It reminds us that we can never know what's in store for us down the road, or even tomorrow. And it tells us

it's never too late to begin anew, or start over in our lives, whether we be nineteen or ninety-nine....

Abram was OLD. Sarai was OLD. But their aged state didn't make any difference to God. Age was not the issue for Abram and Sarai.... faith was. And faith doesn't have an age. All it needs is a warm body, no matter how many wrinkles that aching, aging body has....

No matter if you're rich or poor, or sick or in robust health....

No matter what your particular religious tradition might be, or no religious tradition at all....

Faith in life.... faith in the future.... is what counts, not age.... or economic status, or physical well-being, or what holy orders of your particular religious tradition you follow or don't follow.

Now this doesn't mean that Abram and Sarai didn't doubt the message God brought them. The text doesn't tell us they exclaimed, "Oh joy! Isn't parenthood going to be wonderful at our age?!" If you read on in this story you learn that Sarai laughed when God told her she was going to have a baby at the age of ninety. God said, "You laughed." And Sarai said, "No I didn't." And God responded, "YES, YOU DID!" (Gen 18:12-15), and left it at that.

It seems to me sometimes God leaves us sitting in our own soup of incredulousness or disbelief for a purpose. Maybe it's just not time yet for us to see clearly what lies ahead. Read the Bible.... The human story of disbelief is told over and over again. People just don't want to believe what's going to happen to them and to those they love until waaay down the road....

Jesus' first disciples, those twelve guys I mean -- not the women -- didn't believe what was going to happen to *him* even as he himself was *telling them* what was going to happen. The Mark passage that was read today details one of those tellings of Jesus about how things were to turn out for him. He says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (MK 8:33) In today's vernacular, I wonder if Jesus might have said to Peter, "What ARE you thinking!/? Get real, buddy! Things are going to get a lot worse before they get better!"

We're in the second week of Lent – that period of the Christian year when we are to look at ourselves and at one another and consider our own understandings of faith and doubt, of life and death, of today and tomorrow and still.... in the end, when Easter comes.... to remember there is always, always new life to be had....

But having faith there is always new life to be had doesn't mean we don't question sometimes or that we don't have doubts, as Abram and Sarai demonstrate to us. Having faith doesn't mean we aren't incredulous when things happen that seem absolutely outlandish and beyond belief.

Faith comes with one big string attached. Sometimes you just gotta believe.... even when it seems impossible or ridiculous to believe.... even when all indications point to logical, rational, cynical disbelief and doubt that the current situation will ever get better.

In light of many things going on in the world right now – deadly strife on the other side of the world, and right here in our country,

situations in which American soldiers and diplomats and journalists are caught in the crossfires of hatred and prejudice,

when political wrangling and infighting in our own government seems way out of control,

when harsh and cruel and crude words are spoken and spread near and far through the media of the worldwide web,

when a nineteen year old man guns down seventeen young people and teachers with an assault rifle meant for war, and we can make no sense of such horrific killing,

in the midst of all these situations, how are we to believe there isn't anything too incredible, too impossible for God to accomplish? How are we to accept and affirm that there even is a God, a divine force, that really gives a.... darn? (Any ideas? It's response time!)

My answer to that question came to me this past week in the coverage of the young people who survived the massacre of their friends and teachers in their high school in Parkland, Florida. My answer is affirmed in learning of the thousands of other young people around the country standing up to their elders and saying, "Enough is enough! We will not accept these rampage killings as normal!"

I am affirmed in the belief that one day at a time we will move forward, trying hard to remember that just offering prayers and condolences to the families of those killed by individuals carrying assault weapons is not enough.

How do we live out our faith in God in these violent times? God reckoned to Abraham and Sarah that living out their faith, *even in their old age*, was enough. Paul preached to the Romans they were reckoned to God also as they lived out their faith *in the shadow of their sacred ancestors*. Jesus told his disciples that "*for the sake of the gospel*," (Mk 8:35) they would be reckoned to God also.

One day at a time we WILL move forward,
some days doubtful,
some days incredulous that anything good can happen again,
some days going by through a blur of tears,
but always, always remembering that nothing is impossible for God. For where only death seems to reside.... new life will spring forth. I believe that... for the Bible tells me so. Do you? Let the people say, "Amen."