

Proper 6 A 2017

Genesis 18:1-15

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Our faith is a story.  
We love our faith most,  
understand it best,  
express it most clearly,  
when we tell the story.

There is theory,  
Theology,  
Doctrine,  
A world of ideas.  
All these are important.

But when we tell the story,  
Our faith shapes our lives,  
Our world,  
Our relationships,  
Our past and our potential.

Our story tells us that the world is good,  
That love is the strongest power there is,  
That hope, and change,  
And reconciliation,  
And new life  
Are possible.

That we are free,  
That our actions and responses have meaning,  
That we are bound together in deep connection  
Within the web of all that is.

Our story tells us, as well,  
That we are constrained  
by the bitterness and brokenness of the good world,  
that we use our freedom to treat each other badly  
in every possible way,  
that hope can faint and fail.

Some of our story is dark,  
And some is bright,

And some is hope and failure intertwined.  
Our story shows us a world that is all too real.  
Sometimes so real that we hide from its truth.

Through a hundred generations and more,  
We have told the story of Abraham and Sarah  
As a story of faith,  
And promise,  
And revelation.  
And so it is.

But there are rough threads woven into the story  
That have been hidden through the ages,  
And when we begin to see them,  
The story becomes more complex.

In the end, this is good news.

Our story of faith is so complex,  
Has so many facets,  
That it is possible to spend a lifetime delving deeper,  
Seeing from new perspectives.

We can enter today's story –  
When God appeared to Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre –  
We can enter through many portals,  
And each one will shape our experience and understanding.

If we enter this story through the doorway of the heart,  
Experiencing it as a story of relationship with the holy,  
Then it can be a story about welcome, hospitality,  
Mutuality –  
A story most beautifully and powerfully expressed  
In the traditional icon of the holy trinity.

*(cont'd)*



In this icon,  
The divine self is relational,  
Dynamic and stable,  
Complete, and yet open,  
With a space for you to enter,  
To sit down and share,  
To be at home.

The truth of this icon  
Goes beyond the events and limits of the story,  
And shows us the promise of God's welcome,  
And our welcome of God.  
It is a promise for all of us.  
All we need to do  
Is see the open space at the center of the divine,  
and enter.

There are other ways to read this story of promise.

Through a hundred generations and more,  
We have told the story we hear today  
As the story of Abraham,  
Who believed the unknown God who appeared to him  
And called him forth into a new land.  
How he paid attention to the call of God,  
How he followed wherever God showed the way,  
How he lived by the righteousness of faith.

The promise to Abraham,  
That he would be the father of a thousand generations,  
Moves closer to fulfillment in this story.  
In Abraham's story,  
Obedience is valued,  
Righteousness is rewarded,  
Promise is fulfilled.  
The story of Abraham shows us one way of faith,  
A way we have valued highly for many generations.  
And that is good.

But this is Sarah's story too.  
A story we tell less often.  
What happens when we tell this story  
With Sarah at the center?  
Sarah, who could not bear children,  
Lived in a time and place where only bearing children  
Could make her precious.

Sarah, who was very beautiful,  
Went with Abraham into Egypt,  
Where her husband Abraham said she was his sister –  
Which, in fact, she was –  
And gave her to Pharaoh for his harem.

Sarah, who was trapped,  
With enslaved Hagar,  
In the original handmaid's tale –  
But that's a story for another day.

Sarah, who laughed.  
She laughed, says the story, to herself,  
Not out loud, with delight,  
But bitterly, maybe even scornfully,  
As she listened from behind the tent flap.

Sarah, who came to a swift and bitter end,  
Almost unnoticed,  
At the completion of Abraham's dramatic,  
Terrifying story of faith.

Barren,  
Sent to Pharaoh's harem to keep her husband safe,  
Locked in conflict  
With the woman serving as her slave and surrogate,  
Offered what seems an empty promise  
Long after it's possible,  
Felled by the news that her husband  
had been willing to sacrifice her child,  
Sarah would tell a different story  
If she had more voice in scripture.

Sarah, who laughed.  
Her laughter,  
And her few words,  
Can be understood in many ways.

Maybe she was, in fact delighted.  
But there is little textual evidence  
To make us believe this –  
Only wishful thinking makes us assume  
She believed, and laughed with joy.

What if, instead,  
She is laughing with scorn  
At the incredible words  
Of the mysterious stranger.  
Commentators usually assume  
She doesn't know the triple stranger is God,  
But what if she does?  
What if she is laughing at the promise of God?

Don't forget, God is new for these people.  
For Sarah, as for Abraham,  
There was a life before this new God,  
A life back in another country,  
With other gods.  
And in fact,  
This new God has never spoken to her before.  
And even now,  
The only time God addresses her  
Is to say,  
Oh yes you did –  
You did laugh.

Why should Sarah trust this God?  
Why should Sarah believe this story would end well?

When she laughs,  
Couldn't she be saying,  
Why would I expect my story would turn out well?  
Nothing so far would lead her to believe it was so.

That's the question scripture poses, over and over –  
Just as our lives do.

Why, when we look at the world around us,  
Would we expect the story would turn out well?

That's the cynical, world weary question  
That surely follows us through our anxious and angry time.  
It would be naïve,  
Surely,  
To avoid asking it –  
Or to refrain from asking it.

Where is the evidence of promise fulfilled?

Sarah asks a real question,  
For herself and for us.  
Her life with God is very different from Abraham's.  
His is the way of unfolding promise and unquestioning obedience –  
An obedience we question  
When we look at the most dramatic moment of his story.  
But Sarah's way is the way of doubt,  
Of struggle, of complaining,  
Of protest.

She has something to show us,  
And tell us, in her way of being with God,  
And her story can tell us something about God, too,  
If we let it.

Remember, God is new for her.  
Nothing in her experience so far would show her  
That this story will turn out well.

But in this story,  
She, and we,  
Begin to learn that God is faithful,  
That God brings forth new life  
From impossible traps,  
That God cares not only for those who obey,  
But for those who push back.

Sarah shows us that God will act for our good  
Even when we doubt.

So what does that mean for us,  
Here and now,  
In a difficult time?  
Is there good news for us?

This is the good news:  
God is already entering this moment,  
Whether we are faithful like Abraham  
Or scornful like Sarah.

In fact,  
God's passion is to come looking for those  
Who most need to be found.

Jesus tells the disciples  
To look for those who need them,  
The lost sheep.

We can be sure,  
Here and now,  
That whether we are faithful and obedient,  
Or have lost hope,  
Or are tempted to react with anger  
Or even condone violence,  
God is already looking for us.

Sarah's experience is very real,  
Even if our story of faith  
Gives her less to say  
Than we might wish.

Her story, woven into the story of our faith  
Is a story that can help us in times of sorrow,  
Times of shame,  
Times of doubt.

God made a promise  
To the woman who laughed.  
And God was faithful.

The same is true for us.

This is a story of faithful obedience and scornful doubt.  
That means there is a place  
In the story for any and all of us here,  
And everywhere.

But beyond that story,  
And underneath it,  
Deeper than what we learn from Abraham and Sarah,  
There is a wider truth,  
the truth of the icon.

The open space in this story is for everyone,  
For the Abrahams,  
And the Sarahs,  
And those for whom the mysterious guest friend  
is still a stranger.

This is a story of mutuality and welcome,  
Of our relationship with the God who always has room for us.

Enter the story here,  
Or anywhere,  
And remember the promise,  
Hold on to hope,  
Embrace the renewal of the world.

*Icon of the Holy Trinity (The Hospitality of Abraham), Andrei Rublev, 15<sup>th</sup> Century*