

“Unbelievable”
Genesis 17:1-7(8) 15-16
Sunday, February 28, 2021
Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah fundamentally changes their lives even as it seems impossible to believe.

Some years ago, author Bruce Feiler wrote a book called “Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths.” Feiler notes that if you’re interested in digging up historical facts about Abraham, you are going to find yourself out of luck. Feiler began his quest to understand Abraham by visiting an old Rabbi in Jerusalem, a man who was himself a biblical scholar. Sitting near the heart of the ancient city – the most sacred place for Jews, Christians and Muslims, Feiler asks the ancient rabbi whether or not Abraham actually existed.

“Oh, he exists,” the professor told him. “Just look around you. But remember archaeology cannot prove or disprove the Bible.” You have to look at the text, the rabbi told him. “And what will I find?” Feiler “Look, to me,” he said, “the patriarchs and matriarchs in the Bible are real. I have no reason to doubt it. Whether all the details are correct, I don’t know, and I don’t really care. If you’re looking for history, you’ll be disappointed. If you’re looking for Abraham, you won’t be.”

Biblically speaking, Abram (his name isn’t changed until chapter 17) appears at the end of a long-list of passages we rarely read and somewhat off-handedly dismiss as the “begats” in Genesis 11:

Shem begat Arphaxad; Arphaxad begat Salah; Salah began sons and daughters, Eber begat Peleg,
Peleg begat Reu, Reu begat Serug, and Serug begat Nahor, and Nahor began Terah, and Terah began Abraham.

Somehow, someone kept track of all of this without the assistance of Ancestry.com!

The story of Abram is the story of the God who makes a way when no other way is imaginable, a God who creates a future where no other future is visible.

By any measure, it is a story we need at this time. Margaret Heffernan is a successful entrepreneur and business author. She published a book last year titled “Uncharted” which makes the case that we live in a time of “ineradicable uncertainty.” We move through uncertain times faithfully, discovering the gift of resilience in moments of change.

When we encounter Abram, he is already an old man. He and Sarai have no children. After all those “begats,” we end up with an old man who has no children...no children equals no ancestors...no ancestors equals no future. Time after time, God’s call has come to Abraham, assuring him that he will be blessed by becoming the father of a multitude. Time and after time, Abraham and Sarah have listened to God’s call, and trusted in God’s leading them to new places. They have moved more from place to place – as my father used to say, “It may be cheaper to move than pay the rent.” Yet year after year goes by, and still there is no child. No child...no ancestors...no ancestors...no future...no future, no promise.

It is an old story, but a story that speaks to those of us who also feel we have travelled long and far, trusting God up and down the winding pathways of life. Abraham and Sarah’s story is a story that resonates within us this Lent because we too have our doubts about the future. We are the ones who have trudged across pathways and crossed dangerous intersections. We are the ones who have walked through empty wildernesses, places as barren as we can imagine. We are ones who have wondered...are the promises of God even believable?

Abraham and Sarah have travelled long and far, but still they have no heir. The time for them has passed. They are more interested in shopping for retirement investments than college funds, more interested in purchasing Ben Gay than baby shampoo.

No child...no ancestors...no ancestors...no future...no future...no promise. No promise, then no God?

To borrow language from the Gospels, Abraham and Sarah have indeed taken up their crosses in their pursuit of God’s promise. They have followed God faithfully, subjecting themselves to ongoing pain and suffering—even the rejection of a community that placed ultimate value in the birth of children.

The situation is particularly embarrassing for Sarai—the inability to have children was seen as a curse, a sign that you lived outside of the blessings of God. The situation for Sarai is so unbearable that she eventually arranges for her husband to have a child with one of her servants, Hagar.

But when Hagar has Abraham's child and names him Ishmael, Sarah immediately regrets the arrangement. She orders Abraham to send Hagar away, out into the wilderness where she will be unable to survive.

Sarah is filled with a particularly toxic combination of rage, envy, shame, and fear. She is barren of children but filled with pain. She is likely beginning to think Abraham was gullible for believing in that unbelievable promise of God.

So when God appears yet another time, all that Abram can do is to fall forward, flat on his face. His posture honors the overwhelming majesty of God, but perhaps he is also filled with regret and disgust. How long will you keep trusting in a promise that never seems to come true?

How long will you wait for an appointment for a vaccine? How long will you wait for a justice that has been denied you? How long hold on to hope that is fading fast?

This moment, however, is different. God changes their situation, first by changing their names, and secondly by uttering the words that seem so unbelievable it makes both Sarah and Abraham laugh out loud. "You're going to have a son," God tells them. "My promise is true." It is an idea so preposterous that Abraham's sides explode in laughter. A child? A baby? Right, God.

One day when our daughters were between 2 and 4 years old my wife, Carol, called me at work and said, "Hi, honey, I thought I'd call to tell you that the rabbit died." What do you say in response to that? She kept it up for a few more minutes, letting me twist in the wind a bit before she said, "You know I am talking about our neighbor's pet, don't you?"

This is exactly Abraham's response. He finds the idea so ludicrous that he cannot stop laughing. God seems less amused. God assures Abraham that this will indeed happen, and as if to reinforce his point, God says to Abraham, "Oh, and you'll name him...Isaac." In Hebrew, Isaac means, "he laughs."

God's promise seems so thoroughly unbelievable that it feels as though the Lord is about to say, "I think that's hysterical!"

Suddenly, the world has shifted. It all seems like foolishness, but then God's promises always seem foolish in the wisdom of the world. Everything changes for Abraham and Sarah: their names, their roles, their entire identity. God calls them to step forward toward a future that cannot be fully understood. It will be a future filled with all the joys and heartbreak of parenting. But it also be a future of hope secured in the promise of God that does not fail.

That is our promise as well this second Sunday of Lent. We do not know what the next step of our journey of faith will be like. Certainly none of the 500,000 persons in the United States who have died from Covid-19 could have predicted this past year. Yet the promise of God continues to go out to flawed, broken, and empty people. It is a promise that reaches into our broken, bruised, and barren hearts. We may find it unbelievable. Perhaps even unbearable.

But it is the promise which will heal us, and it is the promise that will lead us forward even as pick up our crosses, and follow in the steps of Christ who guides us.