

“Promises Promises”

Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant."

They said, "Do as you have said."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?"

So he said, "Here, in the tent."

And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son."

Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing.. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?" Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."

But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.

And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

Genesis 18:1-15

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Luke 24:28-35

I've always thought that belief and doubt coexist together in our lives of faith. We believe in God, yet we have lots of questions about God. Our faith in God's love leads us to wonder why this world is so full of pain. Our scriptures backed up my thoughts about belief and doubt by providing stories where the faithful question God's ability to fulfill promises. God's promises often seem a bit naïve or flat-out impossible to the ears of the receiver. The Bible tells us that the faithful question, reject, and even offer up alternatives to God's promises. Today's scripture passages made me wonder if my notion of belief and doubt mixing together is wrong. Belief and doubt don't mingle and coexist in any comfortable fashion! They collide with one another, forcing us to question and confront, to ask and seek help. Remember the famous cry from a desperate believer to Jesus, "Lord

I believe, help my unbelief”? Yet Sarah and Abraham believed and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus believed, even as they doubted God’s promises to them.

We suffer from what I am going to term “promise-perceiving limitations.” When God promises what we know to be humanly impossible, we chuckle. When Jesus our living Lord walks next to us, we are still so fixated on his death we can’t even recognize him.

The sermon title today, “Promises Promises” is the title of a not-so-stellar rock song from the early 80s. I chose that title for this sermon because it witnesses to the source of our promise-perceiving limitations. In the song, the singer bemoans his lover’s “promises promises” which are never fulfilled. She continually promises her love and never follows through. The singer laments his trusting ways! Now he is so jaded he writes a song about the fact that her promises are hopeless, empty words. Empty promises. We’ve all heard them at some point in our lives. We’ve probably even made a few ourselves.

In today’s Old Testament reading, Abraham remained silent upon hearing God’s promise of a son to Sarah. Maybe that is because in the preceding chapter he had his own laugh, falling to the ground, when God made him the same promise. Abraham and Sarah knew where babies come from. They were barren their whole wedded life and now both of them were beyond the ability to have children. They felt there was no chance for the fulfillment of God’s promise. They laughed. They were silent. They feared.

It is an interesting phenomenon that we, who cannot see past our own perspective of reality in the easy times, think we can limit God, in the midst of the hardships of our lives. When we realize God’s promises are out of our control to make happen, our easy out is sarcasm or a good laugh. For what other option could there be if our main understanding of promise stems from our relationships with one another? We know we only follow through on simple promises. We aim to do our best to fulfill our promises, but we falter here and there, relying on forgiveness when we break our promises.

But God makes everlasting covenants. God makes eternal promises. God’s word is radically different from our own. I’m talking about the whole truth and nothing but the truth. A covenant kept forever! We are called to believe God’s promises in an era where truth is accepted only as I know it or as you know it personally, not by faith alone.

But sneaking into our promise-perceiving limitations creeps one hard to dodge question, based on faith alone. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

“No!” We respond. We know this answer only through faith, and in faith our limitations dissolve through the gift of grace so we can believe the unbelievable. We know the answer, and like Sarah, we want to deny like crazy that we ever doubted God.

Then we remember more of the story. We remember through the scriptures that we are receivers of the promise. God’s promises are radically different from our own. We are not the ones God’s promises depend on. Our doubts go along with our human nature and often lead us closer to God in the end. Promise fulfillment is God’s nature, God’s work.

“Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him...and they said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us.’” In remembering we receive and then we are called on to share the promise.

In both scripture passages, after knowing God’s promise fulfilled, after receiving, Sarah, Abraham, and the disciples went and shared their stories with others. Abraham and Sarah proclaimed God’s promise fulfilled in Isaac, whose is named “Laughter” as God promised. The two disciples hiked back to Jerusalem to proclaim God’s promise fulfilled in their risen Lord. Looking back led to proclamation of their reaffirmed hope in God. Faith and doubt collided and God’s promises were fulfilled nonetheless.

Borrowing a line from Sarah, “Who would have said that Sarah would nurse children?” Only God, the maker of everlasting covenants. No one else knew it was possible.

To hear God’s promises we have to be willing to share the story of God at work in the world. Our affirmations of faith are encouraged by hearing the good news in the scriptures, and by sharing the unique ways God has upheld our individual lives. When we look back and then share, what was unknown is made known. This is what Augustine sought to do in his famous spiritual memoir *Confessions*. Augustine felt the pieces of his story of faith only made sense when held in tension with the larger Christian narrative of God’s steadfastness in fulfilling promises.

You and I hardly know each other. Building up human trust takes time. Our level of trust with one another is not the most important part of today. The most important thing for the life of this church is for all of us to place our trust in God and what God might bring about through the Holy Spirit. Only God knows where God will take us together. The future of Central Presbyterian Church is wide open. Remembering and learning from our past should remind us that we are not in control of the future. We are called to claim God's promises as our hope. That we are justified by faith through grace alone. That because God loves the cosmos beyond the limits of our understanding we are called to love every neighbor, every enemy, and all creation as well. That the Spirit will continually call us together to be the one body of our living Lord Jesus, picking us up and knitting us together when we stumble. Promises! Promises! Through faith we know God's promises will be fulfilled! Amen.

Beth Godfrey
Central Presbyterian Church

June 26, 2005
Geneseo, New York