

No Laughing Matter
June 10, 2007
The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis
Genesis 18:1-2, 9-15
John 7:53-8:11

When Karen and I found out we were having a girl, we were thrilled. The news came to us from my ob/gyn's office as part of the results from my amniocentesis, so we felt fairly confident about the accuracy of the information. We must have talked a dozen times on the phone that day, in one of the calls, Karen said to me, "There is so much to do - we're having a girl - now we REALLY have to work hard to make the world a better place for her to live."

Now that Hannah is with us, I find myself thinking even more about the state of the world. Since her birth, I have been saving certain new clippings that will help describe to her what the world was like in this first year of her life. What started innocently for us, I have since come to find out is trendy. If the parenting yahoo group for our neighborhood is any indication, it is apparently a popular activity among parents to make a "time capsule" of your child's first year.

I felt like I saw more about the happenings of the world than I had for months after Hannah was first born, as CNN became one of the backdrops to help keep me awake for late night feedings (I know this is against all the parenting rules – you are supposed to play soft music and keep on only soft lights, not watch TV, but I needed all the help I could get to stay awake in those early days!) Within the span of a few weeks after Hannah was born, James Brown, former President Gerald Ford, and Saddam Hussein all died, talk began about the troop surge, and coverage started pouring over those who announced their intention to run for president in 2008.

I began to realize that unless I wanted to invest in outside storage, I had to be very selective about what I kept to pass on to Hannah about her first year of life, and I also became suspicious that a large part of this project was more for Karen and me as a way of remembering the world we were living in as we tried to navigate the new channels of parenthood.

As the pile grew, I found myself feeling very apologetic. The glorious cocoon that had insulated me toward to the end of my pregnancy and in the early weeks of Hannah's life began to fall away. In those early days, I still cared very little about anything outside of our immediate family, but outside world did creep into the edges of my awareness again. This remembering led me, and still does, to whisper occasionally in Hannah's ear how sorry I am about the state of the world into which she was born. I worry for my daughter and all our children about the current state of the world. In particular, I want Hannah and her peers to have the fullest range of possibilities open to them to live into their own confidence, and it seems at times as if the exact opposite of that freedom is emerging in the world.

Not too long after I returned to work from parental leave, the Supreme Court passed a ruling on *Gonzales v. Carhart* and *Gonzales v. Planned Parenthood Federation of America*. This ruling, known as the "Federal Abortion Ban" made it much more difficult for women to exert the freedom of decision making about their reproductive health, in particular to terminate a pregnancy during or after the second trimester. This ruling was particularly alarming because Justice Kennedy suggested in his majority opinion that this decision is such an important moral

issue that women are not truly able to make it for themselves, so the court must step in to provide a moral standard.

Not all faith traditions and not all clergy stand with those who condemn women and their families for the difficult decision to terminate a pregnancy. In fact, a fair amount of clergy and faith traditions recognize the complex pastoral issues that are rarely given voice in the debate. A statement from the Clergy Advisory Board of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America asserts the following: “Our pastoral care experience teaches us that difficult decisions about health care are best left to the doctor, in consultation with the patient and without interference from politicians or the courts...As clergy we assert that is the right of a woman to make the difficult determination to end her pregnancy guided by her faith and her conscience.”¹ This articulation of the importance of the pastoral care elements is often overlooked in the polarizing arguments around this issue. These difficult decisions are often made by women and those closest to her, reflecting the concerns and needs of the entire family.

This is one example of my feeling like the butterflies of anxiety are permanently moving into the pit of my stomach. In my child I feel all the hope that the world has to give, like most parents, I could pontificate for hours about how much better the world is because Hannah is in it and I do believe this is true; but I also know that I truly regret that this is the world she has been born into, surely there was more I could have done, and could now do, so that she does not have to struggle or be subject to pain or suffering of any kind.

Perhaps this tension of hopefulness and anxiety is part of what gives Sarah her case of nervous laughter in the passage Roman read from Genesis this morning. How long had she hoped for the opportunity of pregnancy? How afraid was she to bring a child into the world in which she lived? She and Abraham had left their country long ago to go as they were led by God; they lived as nomads, trusting in God’s covenant, but the ancestors who were promised in the stars were often obscured by their inability to have children together. When these messengers appeared and brought this news that she would have a child, is it any wonder that Sarah was incredulous?

In fact, Abraham had been given the news in the chapter before and had been just as disbelieving, also laughing to himself and asking: “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” In fact, he is so unsure that this is possible that he even suggests to God that a more simple solution be considered: “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” Abraham suggests. Ishmael, you may remember, was the son of Abraham to Hagar, a young boy at this time, already growing and playing in the tents of Abraham and Sarah. God has other plans though, and tells Abraham, “No, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son...”

By the time Sarah hears word of this plan and responds in disbelief, it is as if the Lord’s patience is wearing thin. In the passage we heard today, Sarah is participating through the tent entrance. Sarah’s laughter to herself is apparently perceived by the messengers who are speaking to Abraham, and he is asked why Sarah laughed at this thought of having a child. A clear warning is sounded that doubt in this issue is no longer acceptable: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Then, as an ending to this very serious conversation with significant consequences, Sarah and the Lord go back and forth like children on the playground about whether she actually laughed or not. Of all that is told about her life in the Bible, this episode is probably the best remembered part of her story.

We might laugh ourselves at this point and consider how archaic this passage seems, but after all, it was just a few weeks ago the news covered for many days the story of woman who

was sixty who had twins. Going back to those questions that we asked about Sarah as we entered this passage, we can see a glimpse of how she expresses the tension she feels about the hope of having a child and the anxiety she feels about a child being brought into the world in which she lived.

Now, I do not love the patriarchy expressed in these verses: Sarah is not really engaged in the conversation directly, but through Abraham, Sarah is never really asked about HER choice to accept this charge, it is bestowed upon her mostly through her relationship with Abraham and God's covenant with him. However, there is an important theology of possibility that blossoms out of these verses. It comes in the form of rhetorical question: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" In the tension of hopefulness for a new child and anxiety about the kind of world that this child will inherit, that question is an incredibly powerful point on which to anchor hope.

In surprising ways, the reading from John's Gospel mirrors a similar hopefulness growing out of possibility. Like Sarah's laughter, this passage is probably one of the best known stories about Jesus in the Bible. In a book called "Misquoting Jesus," Dr. Bart Ehrman suggests that our familiarity about this passage is no doubt in large part to Hollywood's fascination with the story in numerous versions of Jesus' life told on film.² Our familiarity can breed laziness, and we can think we already know what it says, for example, I was surprised in re-reading it again this time to see that it appears in the context of Jesus teaching in the temple; for some reason I always picture Jesus stumbling into this scene at just the right moment rather than it occurring as a test between his commitment to the law and his adherence to his own teachings of mercy and forgiveness.

You will see if you look at this passage in your pew bible, and in most Bibles, that there are brackets around the text. This distinction indicates that scholars who study the manuscripts of the New Testament believe that this passage was not part of the original text of John's Gospel, but that it was added at a later time. In no way does this diminish the meaning of the text, for clearly it is one of the best examples of how Jesus uses his cleverness to teach his message of love and forgiveness.

Like Sarah's story in Genesis, this situation is no laughing matter for Jesus or the woman. She has been accused on violating one of the foundational laws concerning adultery and, while her companion in this crime is strangely absent, her very life is at stake. Like Sarah, though, her destiny is not determined by her own decisions; in this case, it is heavily dependent on the response of the people around her. Sarah's hope comes out of the possibility and hope of finally having a child. This woman's hope comes from the power of suggestion, the suggestion of Jesus that those condemning her recognize their own faults, compare those faults with this woman's transgression, and therefore reverse their intentions to take her life.

When you think about it, it was a big risk for Jesus to ask this group, who had enough ambition to round her up in the first place, to recognize their own shortcomings and then make the connection that they were equally accused as this woman. It would have been easy for one of them to consider their sin lesser than hers and release the fist that held the first stone. The possibility and hope that comes from this narrative actually comes from that lack of action; condemnation falls away when none stand to accuse her. In the end, she does not condemn herself either, thus clearing a path for her to walk away from life-taking judgment.

Part of what these two biblical stories struggle with so fiercely is the agency or lack thereof in the lives of the women described. So much of our hopefulness and belief in the possibilities that exist around us come from our ability to understand and act out of our own moral agency. More simply, it could be described as confidence in the possibility. Ultimately,

this confidence is what secures us to the hopeful side of that tension discussed earlier – the tension between possibility and fear of the harm that comes to us through the brokenness of the world.

Going back to my new experience of parenthood that I was describing earlier, how is it that I help my daughter feel this confidence? How is it that as one of your ministers I help you know this confidence? What is the ballast for this confidence that keeps it grounded in the hope of possibility and not just fluttering about in wishful thinking?

The state of the world has always been unsteady and chaotic. The tension between hope and fear is always lopsided. Perhaps it is the late William Sloane Coffin in his book *Credo* who tells us one way to trust that the power of hope can win the tug-of-war when he reminds us: “All saving ideas are born small. God comes to earth as a child so that we can finally grow up, which means we can stop blaming God for being absent when we ourselves are not present, stop blaming God for the ills of the world as if we had laboring to cure them, and stop making God responsible for all the thinking and doing we should be doing on our own. I’ve said it before and I will probably say it again: God provides minimum protection, maximum support – support to help us grow up, to stretch our minds and hearts until they are as wide as God’s universe. God doesn’t want us narrow-minded, priggish, and subservient, but joyful and loving, as free for one another as God’s love was freely poured out for us...”³

All saving ideas are born small, and the hope of those ideas might always feel small in light of the vastness of the world, but those saving ideas are what give us confidence. They are what give us the courage to laugh and yet believe that anything is possible, these small saving ideas are what teach us to forgive ourselves, and to see our own shortcoming well enough to let the stones of condemnation fall from our hands. Our ballast is not God’s protection, but God’s support. And in that knowledge, it seems my partner really was right, it’s time to work harder to make the world a better place, it is time to get out there and live into all that thinking and doing God has freed us to do.

¹ *Planned Parenthood Federation of America Clergy Advisory Board Statement on The Federal Abortion Ban, April 2007.*

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/get-involved/take-political-action/pro-choice-clergy/fab-clergy-14286.htm>

² Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why.* (Harper Collins: New York, 2005) p. 63-65.

³ Coffin, William Sloane. *Credo.* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2004) p. 10.