

How long do we wait for a promise to be fulfilled? How often do we believe a promise that has been given, but has yet to be realised? How do we discern the most appropriate behaviour or action?

The Abraham/Sarah cycle in the Old Testament is full of odd stories. And today's story is especially odd. It's not odd because three "men" show up "out of nowhere" and need hospitality. This was not unusual in the time period, or for nomadic communities to take in guests who were passing by, whether they were perceived holy or not. Rather the oddness of this passage is in the interchange between the guests and Abraham, where yet again it would appear that God has circled back to Abraham and make even more promises, as God had made many years before and many times over. Except now, Abraham is old, and presumably feeble. Why should they believe God this time?¹.

The pattern of our knowledge of Abraham comes through a series of stories which are based on a promise of God, followed by a response from Abraham and his family. Sometimes Abraham has been honourable and just in these actions – sometimes he has not.

When God first appears to Abram in his father's house and he hears the promise that he will be the father of nations; it made him leave his father's house and to venture out to a god he did not know and for a promise -- it sounds ludicrous. And yet in the larger narrative, the whole story of this couple resolves around this promise. Even to the point when Abraham thinks he needs to help God along and lie with Hagar, rather than believe that he and Sarah would bare children. Abraham makes several efforts to help God along the way to keep the promise of progeny, land, and legacy. All for the want of the promise, for want of a son.

So what are the qualities, the promises which help Abraham and Sarah continue to believe that this might happen. As they become old, past the years of child bearer, how strange this promise of God being made to them must seem.

In fact, if we were continue to read the verses after what we have heard this morning, Sarah actually laughs – seriously how can you still believe this, I am an old woman it is impossible to for me to bear a son at this point! And yet despite the long journey God continues to make promises; and at some level the couple are still captured by this promise.

This image of the promise and the passage of time is an important one for all people of faith because God's time is not our time. We live in an era, which even more than Abraham is impatient with time. As a society we expect everything to be now,

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4148

instant, resolved. But at some level, like Abraham and Sarah, we know this is not always possible.

The problem is that when we come to reflect on our relationship with God, and the nature of the omnipotence and power of God, we expect this power to make things happen faster. More often when I have conversations with people about the existence of God, the main reason people give as to why it cannot be true is that if God was real something would have changed by now. But what if things have changed, but we did not notice, what if the change requires us as humans to change and make space?

So often our impatience with God means we make the situation worse. Theologian Valarie Bridgeman² reminded me that, Abraham for example in despite constant visions and reminders that God will provide, Abraham fathers Ishmael by forcing Hagar into slaver surrogacy in Genesis 17. But God says, (*my words*) “Not the one, sir. I said a son with Sarah.” If one follows this story line, they would be concerned about whether God is going to come through, just as Abram/ Abraham was.

It is hard at times to keep believing when the promises seem so absurd to our own understanding of the world or of how life should be! But God does not have our understanding, thank goodness, for Abraham and Sarah, Isaac is born in their old age. Through both Isaac and Ishmael, Abraham becomes the father of many nations, and a key figure in history – as God had promised in the initial vision. But it took many decades to live out – and in fact, much of the promise became a reality after the death of Sarah and Abraham.

So often now when we talk about faith, we seem to let go of many of the promises of God. We seem to say they are not valid, or couldn't have been real because of the time that has past. Do we really believe God's promise of peace on earth, in a week when tension in the middle east continues to escalate again? But we must believe that it is possible, for it is God's promise to us, though it may need us to imagine it in a different way.

I have been captured over the last few days by much of the footage of the Apollo Moon Landing. It was such an amazing moment in history. A moment that many had dreamed of for centuries, and many still dream to experience. The ability to walk on the moon, to see the earth from space. It seems such an unlikely dream to fulfil, that even with footage and others sharing their experience of that event, there are many who believe it was a hoax and never happened. And that it will not happen again.

So often when things are hard for us to accommodate or understand one option is to dismiss them. Whether it is trusting the amazing footage of the moon landing, or the

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4148

visit of three strangers who remind you of God's promise that you will be fulfilled, or that peace is possible!

The strange thing is however that is not even the big promises that are difficult, so often even the little promises we hear or receive cause impatient. It relies on our ability to discern when things are changing and recognising when God is at work.

Our Gospel reading today is all about this discernment, knowing when and how we notice that God is at work in our midst. Like the story of Abraham and Sarah it is a story of hospitality. Martha welcomes her friend Jesus into the family home to care for him in his sharing of this vision of a new kingdom. Martha discerns that creating space for Jesus is important; but in this context she gets the next bit wrong. She becomes jealous of her sister who discerns the situation is an opportunity to learn from a great teacher. Both Mary and Martha discern different ways forward, Jesus doesn't seem bothered with these choices until Martha's anger gets the better of her – at this point Jesus points out that in this context learning is more important than hospitality. The odd thing is, Jesus and his followers still need Martha's hospitality – so it is not wrong – the issue is when this hospitality impinges on what God is trying to do in this situation which is teach others about the Kingdom of God.

So often it is our frustration, our anger, our impatience which means the fulfilment of God's promises is not realised. Rather than waiting, rather than making space, we cut off the options!

Brian Peterson in his reflection on the Gospel story points out that the problem with Martha's actions is not that she offers hospitality – in fact we ought to realize the ways in which Martha herself is breaking social conventions and making room for the kingdom. It is into her house that Jesus is welcomed. This is the only story in which Martha or Mary appear in Luke, and there is no brother Lazarus mentioned here as he is in John's Gospel. Martha seems to be the owner and head of this household, and welcomes Jesus as his host. Rather, the challenge of Martha's actions, is that she only sees that she needs to provide for Jesus, when in fact it is Jesus who is providing the one thing needed -- indeed, who IS the one thing needed.³

The challenge of both these stories, and the question of promises and hospitality is that so often we seek to be the solution – we seek to be the answer – rather than having the courage to allow God to do God's thing! The challenge to us is not to act, but to wait and reflect, to listen for how God would have the promises fulfilled. It is not easy, but maybe as we enter this quieter time of the year we might create some space to listen for God's voice and promises, practicing the welcome of God in our midst as those before us have done.

Poet and Theologian Edwina Gateley, puts it this way:

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4132

Let Your God Love You⁴

Be silent.
Be still.
Alone.
Empty
Before your God.
Say nothing.
Ask nothing.
Be silent.
Be still.
Let your God look upon you.
That is all.
God knows.
God understands.
God loves you
With an enormous love,
And only wants
To look upon you
With that love.
Quiet.
Still.
Be.

Let your God –
Love you.

⁴ https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Edwina_Gateley.shtml