

God of the Unexpected

Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:8

[A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 15, 2008, by Bishop Kenneth L. Carder, Professor, Duke Divinity School]

God has made some astounding and yet unfulfilled promises. "... they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall they learn war any more"(Isaiah 2:4). Or, "...God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more . . ."(Revelation 21:4).

Faith is holding onto God's promises and living toward them, even when there is no evidence they will be fulfilled. Such faith is difficult and rare. Just ask Abraham and Sarah.

They had arrived at an age where the future was limited, their options were naturally diminishing, and life was rather predictable. Abraham was seventy-five and Sarah about ten years younger. They were settled comfortably with their extended family in Haran. Then Yahweh shows up and scrambles their settled and predictable world with an impossible command and an incredible promise. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you may be a blessing..." (Genesis 12:1-2). No retirement here! No going gently into the night! Suddenly the familiar gave way to the unexpected; the comfortable was lost in struggle; and the predictable was replaced with danger and uncertainty.

For the next twenty-five years Abraham and Sarah pursued that unknown country and awaited the fulfillment of that incredible promise of being the parents of a great nation! How is such a promise to be fulfilled when there is no heir? Their biological clock had long ago expired! Oh, they came up with a couple of schemes to bring the promise to fruition. Maybe nephew Lot could be a surrogate heir. Then there was that rather scandalous scheme that Abraham would father a child by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave girl. Ishmael was born when Abraham was eighty six. But that didn't work out!

Then when Abraham was ninety-nine, God renewed and sealed the covenant and promised that, indeed, Sarah would conceive and bear a son "at this season next year." Abraham's reaction was predictable if the promise was not. He "fell on his face" and laughed!

The drama builds and our reading this morning picks up. Abraham is sitting under the oaks of Mamre cooling himself on a warm day. Three mysterious visitors show up unexpectedly. He runs to meet them and extends the extravagant middle-eastern hospitality, fresh bread from newly kneaded dough, the best calf from the herd. These are no ordinary visitors with an ordinary mission. They are messengers of God!

A visitor, who turned out to be “the Lord,” delivers the implausible message. “Your wife, Sarah, will have a son.” Sarah is eves dropping at the entrance of the tent. Sarah’s reaction? A scornful laugh! When asked why she laughed, her response was obvious, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Then comes the pivotal question of faith from the divine messenger: “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” Abraham’s and Sarah’s laughter was initially one of disbelief. But when the son was born, they named him “laughter” or “he laughs” and Sarah declared: “God has brought laughter for me; and everyone who hears will laugh with me”(Genesis 21:6). Her scornful laughter of disbelief was turned into the joyful laughter of unexpected fulfillment!

Here is my thesis: God’s promises are sure but they are fulfilled in unexpected and untimely ways; and the church is the steward of those promises and a means of their surprising fulfillment.

If hanging onto God’s promise was hard of Abraham and Sarah, it is even more difficult for us. One prominent scientist of the 20th century labeled this age of science “a dark age.” Dr. William Pollard, a physicist and Episcopal priest, contended that modern science imprisoned us in a thought pattern of space and time and matter which function in accordance with mathematically understandable and predictable precision with no place for the transcendent or supernatural.

Dr. Pollard, who was a colleague in ministry when I served in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, writes: “Because of the statistical character of scientific laws, the best that can be done through science is to predict the most probable course of events. Divine providence in its Biblical sense, however, manifests itself chiefly in those crucial turning points at which history takes a most improbable turn.”¹

This God of the unexpected seems to show up in the least predictable times and unexpected places and history takes a most improbable turn:

A murderer on the run was keeping his father-in-law’s sheep, God appeared in a flaming bush and declares: “I have observed the affliction of my people, I have heard their cries on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver... ”(Exodus 3:7).

The stammering Moses went reluctantly to the Egyptian Pharaoh and demanded that the Hebrew slaves be set free. God through Moses delivered them against insurmountable odds, led them through the Red Sea and across the wilderness into an unexpected land flowing with milk and honey, and forged them into new an improbable nation.

When the nation found itself in Babylonian captivity, cut off from their homeland and presumably their God, the God of the unexpected shows up in Babylon and an unlikely Persian king named Cyrus decreed that the captives could go home.

¹ William G. Pollard, *Transcendence and Providence: Reflections of a Physicist and Priest* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p. 195.

Then there is that unexpected, time-altering, history-defining unexpected transitional event. In the silence of a dark night in a remote corner of the world, God showed up in a cattle stall in a vulnerable little baby, born of an unmarried teenage peasant girl, among the homeless.

This Incarnate God went along the lakeside as a carpenter turned preacher and announced the incredible news, “The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news”(Mark 1:14)

He called fishermen, laborers, tax collectors, ordinary folks, to form a new community in which the unexpected presence and power of God would be manifest.

The religious, political, and economic leaders who were threatened by his unlimited love, courage, and goodness predictably put Jesus to death on a cross.

But the God of the unpredictable did the most astounding, unexpected, uncontrollable, and unmanageable act: Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and let loose on the world, the firstborn of a whole new creation!

Then on the Day of Pentecost as diverse peoples from across the world gathered, this unpredictable God of the unexpected showed up in tongues of fire and newness of life; and the church was born to be a steward of God’s promises and a context unexpected acts of divine grace and power.

But the God of the unexpected didn’t cease the divine surprises with the completion of the Bible. Across the centuries history has taken improbable turns with unexpected events. Persons of faith have declared those events as “miracles.”

I heard it in South Africa in 1995. After years of apartheid maintained by state sanctioned coercion and violence, Nelson Mandela was unexpectedly released from prison after twenty-seven long years. In an act undreamed of only a few years earlier, he was elected president. A group of church women in Soweto declared to Linda and me one night, “Do you realize that only a few months ago we could not have been gathering around the dinner table together as black and white people?” She then declared, “Whatever else is said, it is a miracle of God! But we shouldn’t be surprised. God is always doing the unexpected. We just never know when He’s going to do it.”

Those of us who remember the 1950’s and 60’s in the United States can testify to the astounding and unimagined political drama that has unfolding in our land. We know the tight grip of racism, sexism, and ageism on our nation since its founding. Yet, the three most viable candidates for president have been a black man, son of a Kenyan father and Kansan mother; a white woman; and a white man near the age of Abraham when he was called to search for a city not made with human hands.

But we know that the promises of God are always only partially realized in our experience and in history. We only experience intimations and foretastes of the final fulfillment of God's promise! Therein is the Church's mission.

The Church is the community called into existence to be the steward and instrument of God's remarkable promises. We are heirs of those disciples who traveled with Jesus through the cities and villages, "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." With those disciples, we have been called to announce the coming of the kingdom of God and given authority "over unclean spirits, to cast them out, to cure every disease and every sickness."

As were those first disciples, we commissioned to extend the compassion of the One who "had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." We are part of the community called into existence to be the steward of God's remarkable promises of a reconciled, redeemed, and healed creation. And the harvest is always plentiful and the laborers are few.

Here we are, ordinary people, living ordinary and predictable lives, perhaps imprisoned within our rationalism and familiar routines. Some of us have become accustomed to our barrenness as had Abraham and Sarah, resigned to a life of diminishing possibilities. Others are in the prime years struggling to manage and control life for our advantage and security. Still others are young and anticipating an open ended future but anxious about the awaiting unknowns.

As a community of Christ, we hold onto to the promises of God and live toward them because we know that the One who calls us together is the Crucified and Risen one who is the Lord of the harvest, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. We can follow him into the hurting, suffering, and broken places of the world because we have heard the promise: "I will be with you even to the close of the age." And we meet him anew at the Table in the breaking of bread and taking the cup as we "do this in remembrance of me."