

Laughter
Genesis 18:10-14; 21:1-7
Amy Cornell
8-4-13

I want you to imagine this scene with me: an older couple, who have worked hard, had a family business, and are now into their retirement years – well into their retirement years – they have sold their big house and moved into a smaller, one-story condominium that is easier to maintain. They have budgeted their income monthly to make sure they can afford a few trips a year and any health concerns that may pop up. They've spoken with their lawyer and accountant regarding end-of-life issues, and all their affairs are in order. They are in the golden stage of their golden years. They are ready to coast. Then it all busted loose.

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared and said to him, 'You shall be the father of a multitude of nations ... No longer shall your name be Abram, exalted father, but your name shall be Abraham, father of a multitude ... I will make you exceedingly fruitful ... I will give you to all the land of Canaan ... and as for Sarai your wife, Sarah shall be her name, and I will give you a son by her and she shall be the mother of nations.'"

Ninety-nine years old, enjoying getting up late and going to sleep early, and you are going to have a son. Sarah, ninety years old, barely willing to fix her husband a sandwich, and now going to have a baby to look after. *How ridiculous! What a crazy business! Lord, you've got to be kidding.* And the Bible says that Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" *Lord, you've got to be kidding, and it's not only that, it isn't biologically possible, it's just not what I had in mind.*

But we can learn something from Abraham and Sarah. **In the midst of plans changing, it's best to laugh, to let God's will be done, and to not take life so seriously – make our plans, but be willing to change.**

We have a saying in our family about plans changing: Jonathan is a cruise ship and I'm a bumper car....

I guess it's a good thing that Abraham could laugh, and a couple of chapters later, it says that Sarah also laughed (Sarah was probably the cruise ship in the family) about this whole business. In fact, the son who was born was named Isaac, and Isaac means laughter. A good thing they could both laugh and take it in stride, because it seems like a real intrusion, doesn't it?

But I want you to notice that God speaks of all this as a blessing and as a delight. God says, "Look Abraham, I've saved the best until last, and through this son of yours, I am going to bless the whole world. Through this Isaac, this laughter boy, I am going to give you a multitude of descendants and I am going to make a great nation. Abraham, the best is yet to be, the best is yet to be. You think you've lived your life out, but you don't understand. I am not finished with you yet, the best is yet to be."

The poet Robert Browning offers us this way of understanding God's provision for our senior years. In his poem, Rabbi Ben Ezra Browning says, "Grow old along with me; the best is yet to be; the last of life, for which the first was made; our times are in His hand, who saith, 'A while I planned; Youth shows but half; trust God, see all, nor be afraid.'"

Those dreams and desires God planted in your heart, those promises he made over you as a young child, they are still coming to pass. And when they do, take time to laugh. Take time to rejoice. Don't fret. God's got it all worked out.

We do live in a youth-oriented culture. In fact, our church has been talking an awful lot about youth programs, new curriculum, and the growing number of babies we have in this church, which in my opinion is awesome.

But if we fail to see what youth is leading to, then we've missed the full picture. And if we think of our lives as reaching a peak somewhere in the middle years and then declining, we miss God's intention. Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made.

If we take changes that happen as blessings and not curses, if we laugh instead of groan, life will have an Isaac in it.

Titus 2:3-6 says, "Guide older men into lives of temperance, dignity, and wisdom, into healthy faith, love, and endurance. Guide older women into lives of reverence so they end up as neither gossips nor drunks, but models of goodness. By looking at them, the younger women will know how to love their husbands and children." Man, am I glad there are some Titus women in this church!

And you and I know folks in this church whose whole life is spent in service ... people who visit nursing homes, who see to it that others get the attention they need, who invest more hours in labor than they ever did when they were employed, and now there is no boss to tell them what to do, there is no time-clock to punch, there is no worry about office politics ... there is only laughter, Isaac laughter, the best is yet to be. God always has more for us to accomplish, and I believe that for each one of us there is an Isaac out there.

But now there is another facet of this Biblical story that intrigues me; there is another name which shows up in this account. Alongside the names of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac there is somebody else, and that is Ishmael. Ishmael, older than Isaac, already the son of Abraham ... but not his son by his wife Sarah; his son by Sarah's servant Hagar.

I will not take the time to repeat that story, but it's enough to say that Ishmael represents the time in Abraham and Sarah's life where they tried to do it their own way.

Now what does God say about Ishmael to Abraham and to Sarah? He says, "Yes, I am going to give you Isaac, through whom the world will be blessed; but I will also bless Ishmael and I will make him fruitful ... 'he shall be the father of princes, and I will make of him a great nation.'"

God is saying to us, "There are times in your life that did not work out the way you planned." But God will take the crooked places and make them straight. He'll take the regrets we have and open up doors of opportunity. God exchanges beauty for ashes.

When I was pastoring a church in Illinois, the lady who led worship there was named Bea. Bea went through a very messy divorce at the age of 40. She came out of it feeling terrible about herself, down on the church, and lost as to where she was now headed. Her life had a direction, she had hoped to have children, and was now past the time. It was a mess. It was an Ishmael. But at the same time, she thought she heard God's call to give herself to a particular kind of mission work, and here she was, suddenly divorced. What could she do?

She simply trusted God for her future. This is Bea. Actually, as I speak, Bea is in Zambia working in orphanages there. She took her Ishmael situation and now is a missionary to Zambia. Now, where she thought she'd never have kids of her own, Bea has hundreds of children. She is a modern day Sarah.

The best is yet to be. Even though years have passed living with regrets, the best is yet to be, and God has not given up on us. God has a way of using all those Ishmael issues and making them into Isaac laughter.

There was a night when certain men sat at a table in an upper room together. These men were worn down and worn out. That night, their Master talked to them about that which lay ahead, all the suffering that must occur.

If the Master were on the way to the cross and if all they had given themselves to over these three years was now to be lost ... well, it must have seemed as though they had come to the end and there was nothing more for them to do. Ishmael.

But do not count out this Christ. This Christ who spoke of broken body and of poured out blood, this Christ who spoke of the end of his days, this Christ also spoke in those precious moments of the day when he would eat and drink anew in the Father's Kingdom. He spoke of a new day, a Kingdom day, yet to come, and he promised them that they would be a part of that. It would be an Isaac day, a laughter day, a blessing day. And he said, "Behold I make all things new."

If we had some Ishmael moments, here at this Table, he tells us that he has paid the price for us, that he will make all things new, and that ahead of Him there is an empty tomb, there is life eternal, there is something more. Ahead of him, ahead of us ... the best is yet to be.