

Sermon – Third Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 6A)

Scripture Texts: Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7 Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *We worship a God who delights in turning our sources of deepest pain into joy and laughter. And, we are often called to follow this God in weakness and with patience, trusting in God's commitment to redemption.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Sarah's laughter – Can you feel the bitterness? It isn't explicit in the text, so I'm using a bit of imagination here...but I don't think it's much of a stretch! Her's is a bitterness, I think, of three parts.
 - a. It is a bitterness of longing
 - i. Many years of longing! Abraham was 75 when they set out on the journey, and the previous chapter tells us that another 24 years had elapsed.
 - ii. Again, the text isn't explicit, but I imagine there were a number of miscarriages – with Sarah getting her hopes up each time, only to have them come crashing down again.
 - iii. Menopause may even have come with a bit of relief, at least putting an end to that cycle of hope and despair. *Can you feel the bitterness?*
 - b. It is a bitterness of blame
 - i. Sarah has been dragged around the world by her husband, and their infertility is blamed on her; she is barren (a word otherwise used to refer to fields and agriculture, implying that she is failing to fulfill her whole purpose for existing).
 - ii. She has been handed off to pharaoh that Abraham might grow rich, but the text does not show Abraham expressing any concern for her.
 - iii. God has cared a great deal for Abraham's legacy, but not for hers! No wonder she is hiding in the tent when God comes to visit!!
 - iv. This promise from God, coming now, seems like adding insult to injury. *Can you feel the bitterness?*
 - c. It is also a bitterness of guilt
 - i. Exploitation of Hagar – Sarah was the one who took matters into her own hands when, after years of following God, they still had no child. She gave Abraham her slave, Hagar, and told him to use the girl to make a baby – a baby that Sarah would claim as her own.
 - ii. One who too often has been dominated turned to domination
 - iii. NOW, God wants to show up?!? I imagine she feels the weight, here of what she did to Hagar. Was it not necessary after all? *Can you feel the bitterness?*
 - d. Yet, into this bitterness comes the word of God: "Why did Sarah laugh...? Is anything too wonderful for God?"
 - i. These are the same words spoken by the angel to Mary at the annunciation.

- ii. And, indeed, though Abraham and Sarah were old, a son was born to them within the coming year. And they name him Isaac = laughter.
 - iii. God delights to turn the most broken pieces and painful experiences into beauty and laughter and wonder.
- 2. Our call to patience and to weakness
 - a. We've seen the good news, but this passage also holds a challenge – especially when paired with our NT passages!
 - b. These feelings are not foreign to us. I asked if you can feel Sarah's bitterness, but I know that most of us have also felt these three forms of bitterness. We all face troubles in this life; we all face loss and disappointment, we all face longing and blame and guilt. And, it is so easy for us to turn bitter, to blame God, to try and take things into our own hands. We would like to avoid these feelings. We'd like to be able to go out in power and joy, like Jesus send the disciples out in our Gospel. But the reality is that the power of Jesus doesn't come except through the transformation of brokenness.
 - c. But, as we read in Romans, those who would follow Jesus are called to rejoice in our sufferings! This doesn't mean we deny or ignore the pain, but it recognizes and trusts in the good news of Sarah's story – that God does delight to turn our most broken and painful experiences into sources of joy and laughter and healing. This is the message of the cross – the instrument of domination and torture and death is transformed into an icon of love and forgiveness and resurrection.
 - d. This is especially important if we are to be sent out by Jesus, as we read about in today's gospel! When we go out in our own strength, or in our own sense of timing and purpose, we truly tend to do more harm than good. This is the root of colonialism! Instead, we are called to go out knowing our own weakness, knowing our pain and brokenness – but also to go out in laughter and joy, testifying to how God's redemption has reached into our places of deepest pain.
- 3. Exemplars:
 - a. I know this to be true, in that God showed up in the deep pain of my layoff from a job & calling that I had made sacrifices to pursue, but which I loved dearly. I still don't accept the idea that God caused that pain, so as to call me somewhere better, but I am clear that God has redeemed it!
 - b. I know this to be true in the stories that I have heard from others. I think especially of a powerful testimony from Stephen Colbert, who lost his father and two of his brothers when he was only 10. In a beautiful interview with Anderson Cooper a few years ago, Colbert talks about God's redemptive power allowing him to be grateful for the thing he most wishes had never happened.
 - c. I also know this to be true because I have seen some of the transformative work that God does through the ministry of ECS. This is an organization that refuses to hide from or ignore the places of brokenness in our world and in our city. But, rather than going out in power and self assurance, trying to impose their solutions on the world around them, the staff and volunteers at ECS go in weakness, caring for people in all their complexity, and testifying to the grace of God.
 - d. Conclusion: may we also know this grace of God! May we look for God to be at work, especially in the places of deepest pain. And, may we then be sent out, laughing and trusting in God.

Amen.

Notes

- This world was created good, but is clearly full of brokenness. God's plan and purpose is for redemption – healing and setting all things to right
- In carrying out this plan, God does not (and cannot) ignore the most painful and sensitive places in our lives and hearts – but rather focuses there! We see this with Sarah in today's Genesis reading
- I've seen this in my own life and story as well
- What is not healed will go on to cause further harm!
- God comes to us in ways we cannot always explain and that don't always make sense to us – like the coming of God to Abraham and Sarah in these three strangers
- This work of surprising and wonderful healing is crucial for us as we think about our mission and our sending out, as in the gospel. If we go out in our strength, it so easily and quickly devolves into imperialism. But, if we go out with a testimony about how God has worked for redemption in the most broken aspects of our lives, that has transformative power!
- This kind of redemption has been part of the story God is telling from almost the very beginning. And, in the incarnation and crucifixion and resurrection, God himself enters that aspect of the story – taking on weakness that it might be transformed and redeemed.
- Steven Colbert & Anderson Cooper discussion – coming to be grateful for the thing you most wish had not happened.
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