

**July 6, 2014**

**TEXT: Genesis 21:1-7**

**TITLE: A Month With Isaac: Happy Birthday!**

When did you last rearrange the furniture in your house? Some people like to rearrange their furniture on a regular basis. But most folks tend to decorate their homes a certain way and then it stays that way for years. Sometimes a new couch or recliner is bought and so you have to shift things around a bit. But for lots of folks who've lived in their homes for 10, 20, or 30 years, the rooms haven't been redecorated for years. We're creatures of habit – we're not big fans of change. That is true of our living space; it's also often true of our spiritual lives. But the God we serve loves to rearrange things. God loves to tap us on the shoulder and smile and say, "Guess who's having a baby?!"

The birth of Isaac is briefly described in the first seven verses of Genesis 21. The problem is that we fixate on the baby and miss the powerful message contained in the rest of the passage. That's understandable, because as human beings, we can't help but have our attention drawn to newborn babies. A mother pushes a stroller down the sidewalk; our eyes go straight down hoping to catch a glimpse of the infant. We stand in a checkout line behind a young parent wearing one of those baby carriers; we don't notice the parent because our eyes focus on the wispy hair, round cheeks and pudgy legs of the baby suspended in the carrier.

So let me cut to the chase here. The baby born to Abraham and Sarah was a real child, but for us 3000 years later the baby is mostly a metaphor. I could spin out a long sermon on how our God works miracles, such as causing an elderly couple to finally procreate. Or I could wrongly reinforce our society's bias that a woman's worth is linked to her ability to have a child. But today I'm not going to talk about miracles. And as happy as I am to baptize two infants this morning, I'm not going to suggest that finding favor in God's eyes is dependent on bearing children. We are all loved by God whether young or old, male or female, single or partnered, gay or straight, parents or non-parents. So I'll say it again: The birth of Isaac is mostly a metaphor and as such it applies to every one of us in two ways.

First, ask yourself: Where does faith reside in you? Where do we bodily locate our faith? Some believe that faith is in our head, in our brain. It is part of how we understand and think about the world God made and Christ redeemed. Others believe faith is in our heart, expressed through compassion and showing love to others. For the ancient Hebrews, faith was located even lower in the body. Faith is something you feel deep within you, something that is in your gut and which instinctively shapes all the important decisions you make.

Now put yourself in the place of Sarah and expand the body zone in which faith resides. Think of faith as something in our guts and our pelvic area – in our womb. Faith is not just about having a gut instinct about caring for others or standing up for justice. Faith is also about giving birth to new things that arise

from those gut instincts. Faith is more than an idea in our brain, or compassion in our heart. It is something deep within us that stirs us, convicts us, and then literally gives birth to things that are true and righteous.

Since we're so close to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, let me give two quick examples of this 'gut and womb' faith from early American history. 1) The 1776 Declaration of Independence was an act of defiance against Britain. But the first version of it printed in Philadelphia did not have the signatories at the bottom of it. It was only in January 1777 that a new printing of it was ordered. It was entrusted to a woman printer named Mary Katherine Goddard. For the first time Americans and British learned who'd signed the Declaration. Mary Goddard is a forgotten, true American hero for she risked being charged with treason for publishing copies of the Declaration of Independence. Her courage helped give birth to our nation. 2) During the War of 1812, the British advanced on Washington, D.C. intent on burning down the whole city. Yet a quick-thinking government clerk named Stephen Pleasanton managed to grab all our country's essential documents, including the Declaration of Independence, and smuggle them out of the city to hide them in a mill in Virginia. One brave man defied an advancing enemy army, successfully protecting our nation's founding documents like a father whisking a young infant to safety.<sup>1</sup> Faith resides not in the head and heart, but in our gut instincts and what we give birth to.

Now return to the Abraham and Sarah story and let's consider the important detail about their advanced age. But first – a true story: A hospital aide was talking with an elderly patient, who was sitting in her room reading a book, when she happened to mention that tomorrow was her birthday and she'd turn 94. The young man asked her "What's the best thing about being 94 years young?" To which she quickly replied, "No peer pressure."<sup>2</sup>

Abraham and Sarah were old enough not to have to worry about peer pressure. They were set in their domestic routines, and I'd wager set in their spiritual routines as well. They had their tent where they spent their days, and they had faith in God whom they worshiped through predictable rituals and weekly Sabbath prayer. But suddenly God tapped them on the shoulder and said, "Sarah, you'll need new robes that fit over a pregnant belly. Abraham, you'll have to find room in your tent for a cradle. Both of you will have to find swaddling clothes and diapers." God rearranged their world. When they heard this news, both Sarah and Abraham laughed – laughed in surprise, laughed in disbelief, laughed nervously because they couldn't imagine how this "baby-thing" fitted into their life! They shook their heads and said "We're too old for this. We're too settled for this. We've got our furniture all arranged; we've got our life all arranged – we don't have space for a new baby in our life."

But hear again the opening line from Genesis 21: *The Lord dealt with Sarah as God had said; the Lord did for Sarah as God had promised.* Faith in God is not a head thing, an idea you can think about or not think about as the mood hits you.

Faith in God is not a heart thing that might involve empathy or might not, such as when our heart grows cold toward others. Faith in God is a gut thing, an intestinal thing that moves within us as a force of its own. It's a pelvic thing, a womb thing that takes over and emerges out of us like a child we give birth to. Now like Abraham and Sarah, we too might say, "I already have my life arranged. The furniture in my spiritual house is placed just fine. I don't like change. I'm settled. I've given up hoping for anything to be born in my barren existence – my quiet routine – my limited horizon. God, I don't want to think about this right now."

That's why Genesis 21 says what it says just before and just after Isaac's birth announcement. **Vs. 1** - *The Lord did for Sarah as God had promised.* (Life isn't about us – our schedules, our furniture, our timetables, our fears and doubts and prejudices. It's about God's.) And **vs. 6** – *Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.* Not laugh at me, but laugh with me. God did as promised – God brought laughter – and Sarah in old age gave birth.

So what is gestating in you right now? God has promised to deal with you too. God wants something to be birthed by you. What does your gut say to that? Is the furniture in your life nice but boring so it needs to be rearranged? Is it worn and broken down and depressing so it needs to be replaced? Are your days shaped by financial debt, anxieties and worry? Do you feel pushed to the margins of life like an elderly person forgotten in a nursing home room? God wants you to give birth – give birth to a life, yours or someone else's; give birth to justice or to change or to hope. Imagine what it is, with God's help, that you might do that would provoke you and everyone around you to laughter. I'm serious – close your eyes for a second and imagine what God wants to birth through you.

The best parts of this life cannot emerge from flesh and blood alone. The best parts need God – the God who does as God has promised. That's why Christ came into the world as a child, to unsettle nations and kings and force us to see in a fragile child the eternal God and Savior of the world. That's why God still comes to us as a child, to unsettle us and force us to look at everything with new eyes and laughter. Women and men, young, old and very old, today's your day. For Sarah's story is your story. So "Happy Birthday" to you – for what God is about to give birth through you. I can't wait to see the baby pictures!

---

<sup>1</sup> "Washington History isn't all Monuments," New York Times article by Andrew Carroll; July 2, 2013, Travel section p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Diary, New York Times, March 26, 2000.