

Genesis 18:1-15

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6A

June 18, 2023

The Rev. Katherine Bush

“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” It’s a good question. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” And how we answer that question says a lot about us, more about us, in fact, than about God. It’s a question that, when answered, reveals what we ultimately believe about the nature of God.

“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Sarah’s answer goes unspoken; at least, she doesn’t speak words out loud. She laughs, and says to herself essentially, yes, some things are too wonderful, some things are in fact impossible, even for God. Sarah knows how the world works, and she certainly knows how her body works. She knows how old she is, she knows she is past the point of fertility, she is accustomed to barrenness. Sarah and Abraham have adjusted their expectations of themselves and their lives, and they’ve made what seem like the necessary and appropriate accommodations: Abraham has an heir, a son, but a child born of Hagar, his concubine. Sarah laughs then at God’s promise, perhaps to keep from crying. She’s lived with unmet hope for decades, and out of a protectiveness for her own heart, she has right-sized her dreams.

This makes sense, doesn’t it? It’s reasonable for Sarah, and it’s reasonable for all of us who live in the real world to pay attention to how our bodies work and adjust. It seems logical to recognize how patterns repeat, and so to be able to predict what’s likely coming down the pike. We do this in our relationships, we do this at work, we do this in our politics. We have grown accustomed to a similar barrenness - not just in our bodies, but in all the landscapes we inhabit. There is an obvious lack of apparent options, and given the present circumstances and resources, we respond somewhat sensibly with diminished hope. We chuckle to ourselves or roll our eyes about the naivete of others, and we scale our imaginations down to fit inside the status quo, even though we know imagination by definition is meant to be much more expansive.

And it’s worth noting that Abraham and Sarah are generally offered as exemplars of faithfulness. God said go, and they went. God has asked and will ask much of them and promise much for them, and over and over again, they respond with deep faith and trust. Yet, here this afternoon in the middle of their story, they look around the tent at themselves and their lives and decide that this time what God is suggesting is nonsense, it is too wonderful. It’s a reminder, Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, that “this story shows what a scandal and difficulty faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception.” He continues, “The promise ... is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. Embrace of this radical [good news] requires shattering and discontinuity.”

Maybe it’s unexpected to consider good news, hope, a baby, a new possibility as *shattering*, but of course, it is shattering in their small lives and their seemingly closed-off future. This is why it’s so easy to agree with Sarah and think to ourselves that some things are really

too wonderful, some things are just impossibly hard. It's easier not to hope. But what we're really saying when we say that some things are too wonderful is that not only are our hopes shrunken, but our understanding of God is shrunken. We are saying that there are limits on God, which is pretty close to saying God is not God. If God is God, then God must exceed our "parameters of reason, wisdom ... and common sense." God by definition shatters our realities.

Even as Brueggemann's interpretation pushes us to see that faith is actually quite an irrational proposition, he also cautions us not to misinterpret the promise. It's not that every desirable thing will happen as we'd wish; it's that everything God promises is possible. All of us know that we've desperately desired any number of things that did not come to pass. You may not like this loophole, I've certainly balked at it myself, but "God has promised a *future* ... not everything we would seek." And even when the extraordinary possibilities unfold, smooth sailing is not a given. Come back for more of the painful and complicated story of this promised child in a few weeks. The wonderful works of God do not usher in a painless, nor tension-free future. God's promises do surpass our perceived ideas about what is possible, and saying "it's possible" forces us to stretch our hearts and our hopes. And all of this can feel thrilling but also perilous, even dangerous, putting our hearts and hopes out in the open where everything is risky and uncertain. We are being asked to look past our barren hearts and shrunken hopes for new signs of early growth and unanticipated beauty. And it's hard, because faith is hard.

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" A version of this question surfaces again and again in scripture. "Mortal, can these bones live?" "Were you there when I laid the foundations?" "Who do you say that I am?" Whether framed to elicit a yes or a no or a longform answer, these questions really beg us to say what we believe about God. And thus, our answers are not given lightly. It's understandable, maybe even pragmatic, to arrive sometimes where Sarah does that one afternoon at the entrance to the tent and to laugh off the possibility of a life beyond expectations.

But here are those three visitors with their question, and this time not for Sarah but for you and me: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" The answer God hopes to hear is as large as the life God dreams for us and for all of creation. Still, the answer is for each of us to make up our own minds about and to give - straight-faced or perhaps with a little giggle. Staying curious about the future leaves us exposed and vulnerable to disappointment and hurt; it also leaves us open to joys we never considered nor imagined. Wondering what more is possible is the risk of faith, and being faithful doesn't mean we'll get everything we want. Being faithful means believing that God isn't limited by our assessment of what's possible, that our small minds aren't the parameters within which God operates. Being faithful means that we are invited out of an old tent into a new world that shatters our expectations, a world where nothing is too wonderful.