

“The Burden and Risk of Hope”
Genesis 17:1-8 &15-22; Romans 8:19-21; Psalms 126
Rev. Rebecca Simpson
June 25th, 2023

Let's pray.

Gracious God be with us in our understanding of your Holy Word. Reveal to us your call as individuals and as a faith community. We pray this in Jesus name, Amen!

The name 'Isaac' means, 'he laughs'. Old man Abraham bows down way down his face on the ground before God and he laughs and mutters to himself at God's message hearing it for a second time. It's even more improbable now, am I to become a father at ninety nine and Sarah a mother at ninety, he asks really God? You told us this once before and it didn't happen. We lost hope waiting years and still now you come to me saying Sarah will bear my son and we shall name him Isaac and from him a great nation will be born really? God!

I'd like to pause here and just acknowledge that this story it's not just a fairy tale but this is a very real human experience and there's some people in this room or at home or who watch this video maybe I have no idea. Who, who themselves may have waited for a child. Who themselves have mourned the loss of a child. And so I want to acknowledge that for some this story is is not just a childhood Bible story but rather a very real and possibly painful reminder of hopes that didn't come true.

If this is your story, I pray that you would be kind with yourself. If it's tender to you feel free to take a walk in the garden step aside or just give yourself a little hug and know that God is with you. The fact of the matter is that Abraham and Sarah got impatient because God's promise was taking way too long so they had got thinking. Maybe there's something they were supposed to do to spur on God's plan of making them parents of a nation.

See if you don't know the Bible story God has already come to Abraham and Sarah and told them that they would have a child and then, it didn't happen. So they got the idea that Abraham was to have a child by Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. Maybe there was something they were supposed to do to help God's plan happen now this was common practice in their time and Hagar son, Ishmael was perfectly legitimate considered a rightful heir and part of the family as much as any child that Sarah might give birth to.

And for a time Abraham must have thought he had figured out what was necessary on his part to get God's plan rolling. But here is God again for the second time telling Abraham that God's promise of Sarah bearing a child and a nation of children being born to Abraham's lineage was going to happen. There are two dynamics in the story that I would like for us to consider today. The first is, our temptation to grasp for control in response to God's promises. And the second is, the nature of hope and the risk and burden it requires.

Abraham and Sarah were already shocked and disbelieving when God first made the promise of a child. Then when the years stretched on and God's promise didn't happen I have no doubt that they struggled with their faith in that promise. Wanting to believe God's promise but feeling the pain of living without it being fulfilled. Too much for them to handle this must have been incredibly difficult. So, they did what all good human beings would do they took things into their own hands. They did what they could do to make God's promise happen their way.

The plan that resulted in Ishmael was not a terrible plan, but it was Sarah and Abraham's plan, not God's plan. In the end Abraham felt the pain of sending Ishmael and his mother Hagar away. Abraham and Sarah knew what God wanted for them but not seeing the results they lost hope, tried to make things happen on their own.

This is our story we have done this. We know that Christ Church, Universal will not disappear but we worry that there's something more we need to be doing to make whatever God's plan is work better and happen sooner. Research for broad answers to our declining numbers some of

them let us off the hook. It's not our fault, the churches declining. Some of them give us enemies to attack. If we know whose fault it is for ruining the church. Some of them allow us to step back and not take responsibility, and some of them call us into greater action are frenzy of anxious action.

Listen to these excuses and these reasons perfectly real and alive in our world around us, very well could explain the state of our church today, and, so what? Well, there's fewer children being born in Canada every year since the baby boomers, true! People tend toward being spiritual but not religious these days worldly influences have resulted in declining interest in the idea of membership, volunteerism, citizenship, civic life, families are under financial strain they work more than they used to they don't have time to come to church. Societal peer pressure to be at church regularly has totally disappeared. Sports activities for children are offered on Sundays now you know what? we don't say the Lord's prayer in school anymore.

The leadership the Church of the past has really hurt all sorts of people. Church has a bad reputation. Well! all of that's true to some degree or another and maybe it explains the size of our church these days in Canada. They all factor into the state of traditional congregational participation in the western, formerly mainline denominations such as ours.

And so, we, who are part of the regularly worshipping vein of the Church were left thinking well maybe it's us. Maybe there's something we need to do to attract more people back in. If we changed our music or shorten our service or lengthened our service or spruced up the garden and put the right messages on the sign. What if we ran all the right programs. Surely we would grow, more people would join us.

Also possibly true. The problem with all this thinking is the reasons for the decline and the response that we think of that we could do. In there we somehow leave behind our foundation, the foundation of knowing that this place is God's place. Christ Church on the earth is not going anywhere. Christ takes care of what is his. We can get caught up in trying through our own

efforts to make things happen and in that way sometimes too often forget to seek God's vision for us. Like Sarah and Abraham we grow impatient with the slow unveiling of God's way in our midst. We try to make things happen by our own power. Unfortunately when we try to wrestle control away from God we are focused on our own energy, our ideas, our fears, and anxieties. And we missed the opportunity to wait on the Lord, and respond to the holy spirit's guidance and inspiration.

There is a special kind of joy and fortitude that comes when we wait on the Lord, Joy and fortitude. Waiting is incredibly uncomfortable. Our fears and our worries come to mind when we wait. Then what? Well Jesus says come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest he asks us to bring our fears and our worries and our stresses and anxieties to him in prayer and contemplation in faith. But it's risky to ask Christ to grow the church. Such a prayer brings us into a hopeful place and hope opens us up to the possibility of disappointment.

The very nature of hope is that it requires risk, and risk means there is something to lose. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Sarah and Abraham to have hoped for children when they were young and to have been disappointed time and time and time, again. They must have quit hoping at some point. The pain of hope was too great.

One Bible commentator imagines the relief Sarah must have felt when she reached an age where childbearing was no longer possible. She would have finally been released from the burden of hope. No longer bound by the possibility and inevitable disappointment month after month of no pregnancy. How unwelcome it must have been for God to have introduced that hope into her life again after such a long time.

How dare He, come to her at ninety, promise her child. Now as a woman of great years she was told she would bear a child just barely accepting of this idea maybe beginning to embrace it, maybe starting to allow herself to anticipate a sign of her being pregnant and still she waited.

Hope unfulfilled every month despite God's promise. Was God really so cruel as to promise her child after all these years and still cause her to wait so long?

That's what happened! She must have been afraid to hope again. And frankly resentful of the burden of hope. We all carry burdens, burdens of hope. Farmers carry an especially big burden of hope. Psalm 126 illustrates the scene of a farmer who carries a burden of seed into the field weeping and toiling to spread the seed in the field sweating under the hot sun not knowing whether he would reap the reward months later, with all his living on the line invested in the seed that could just as easily be blown away in a storm, or grow into a bounty risky business farming. Risky business hoping. Like faithful Christ followers who toil to bring good news from God to a worn and weary congregation, to a worn and weary world, to a worn and weary neighbourhood. Not sure what goodwill come, what change will occur in the hearts of the people, we don't know.

Farming is a tenuous living. Vulnerable to the years weather plagues and blights and a living devalued by unjust economic practices. While ministering in the church is equally tenuous, serving and giving and leading into the dark, only to look back and wonder where are those who agreed to follow. And yet the joy that comes from the bountiful harvest is also a very real possibility of very real hope to pursue as the seeds take root and the sun and the rain show up the promise of growth is not too foolish to expect.

Richmond Presbyterian Church it is not foolish for you to expect to grow. So also with any Christian ministry on earth expecting God's promise of provision to come to fruition is not too foolish, but it's risky. Ray Anderson says in his book 'The Soul of Ministry', hope is the burden that one must bear in order to live by the promise of God. We are called as Christ followers to radically hope for the promise of God that threw us a multitude of nations will be born who will follow Jesus Christ.

When we gather for worship we are reminded that God's promise to make us heirs to a Kingdom inheritance is here and now. Christ himself already bore the fullness of the burden on our behalf in his death and resurrection. Christ risked the hope of the world to free humanity from the grip of sin. Sin is that harm that we do to each other, to God to ourselves, but it is no longer the pattern and determiner of life because of Christ. In Christ there is no risk of unfulfilled promises. God's promise of new life is already at work in an among us made available to us over and over again in the ordinances, the fellowship, and the worship of the church. By the power of God's Holy Spirit at work in us. Christ Church that place of authentic Christian community has a purpose in fulfilling God's promise of salvation and it's not going anywhere.

If our very foundation as the church is the hope we have in Christ, why do we find it so risky to hope for growth and well-being in the church? Why are we tempted to wrestle control away from God and try to do it ourselves because we're afraid God won't do it. Perhaps the very nature of hope is that it is risky that there is something to lose and it feels like there's a chance that what we hope for what we ask for won't happen.

Each and every one of us have tasted tragedy to some degree or another. We have felt our prayers denied. We look at the evidence of loss and pain all around us every day and we don't. off course we do. We're human. But the good news is this our hope does not depend on us not on our personal or collective strength or determination or moral character not on our abilities or our commitments or our goodness. Our hope the hope of the church the hope of the world is supplied by faith which is the empowerment of God to bear the burden of hope. We do not do this alone. God never expects us to do things alone.

When God introduces hope into our lives God also supplies us. And Christ Church with the power to endure hope and its inherent risk. The power to endure is called faith. That power is not something that you drum up by singing a really good praise song. That power is put in you by God. If you pause and seek to find it, it is there. And the more you pay attention to it the

more alive it is in you. The warmth, i am sorry I can feel the warmth of this candle this Christ candle is warming. That light travels there's energy in the faith the gift of faith that God has already put in you. It is there, nurture it, pay attention to it like the farmer in Psalm 126. We risk a great deal when we sold the seeds of life hoping for joy and peace and freedom from pain for the world. Ray Anderson says, like the farmer, we risk the storms of life washing away our seeds of hope and the droughts of life keeping our seeds from growing and through this risk we face our ultimate helplessness against the reality of life. Try as we might it's not up to us. But by the gift of faith in Jesus Christ God supplies us with the strength to keep sowing and the courage to weather the storms and to hope again and again and again.

To hope despite our previous losses, to hope for transformation the coming of the fullness of Christ light into this dark World. And so listen again to the words of Romans 8 Paul says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed, for the creation was subjected to frustration not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory.

The children of God we are God's creation so go boldly into this world. It's a world that is waiting and thirsting for the good news. Sow the seeds of the gospel bear the burden an risk of hope for the church is Christ's, and the promise of God is trustworthy.

Amen!