



The Joke's On Us: The Dream of God

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

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How many of you have ever had a life dream that just has not materialized? Let me put it a different way. How many of you have deeply desired something, with all your being, and it never happened? I suspect most of us have experienced something like this. Dreaming and desiring come out of the human capacity for imagination. I don't know if animals can imagine things, though I do know they dream based on what my cats' paws do when they are sleeping. But people can imagine things that have not yet existed. Without imagination, we would not have celebrated the 50th anniversary of landing on the moon this week. Without it the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King would never have spoken about a world in which his children could be seen for who they are, instead of what they look like. Without it we wouldn't even try to explore the Marianna trench in the Atlantic or the inner workings of the quantum realm or the consciousness of the animal kingdom. Without hoping and dreaming, Mahatma Gandhi would not have been able to lead his people through a nonviolent revolution to liberate themselves from the British. Without imagination we would not petition our government to treat refugees with compassion.

So we are made to hope and dream and imagine. But so often we are disappointed. I heard someone once express this experience by saying, "The hardest thing to lose is the thing you never had."

What do you do, when this happens to you? Do you just let your dreams go? Do you do just accept things and come up with your best Plan B? And what happens to you in the process? In face of chronic disappointment, it's easy to become numb, or indifferent, or cynical.

Today's story from Genesis is about chronic disappointment, among other things. I know you probably expected me to preach about Martha and Mary today, but I was so drawn to this curious story about three strangers who appear to Abraham under the oaks of Mamre. This story is one of the foundational stories of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition; for those of you who have been discussing Rachel Held Evans' book *Inspired* with me on Sunday mornings, this is what Rachel would call one of the great "origin" stories of our scriptures, that tell us something really important about where we come from. So in this story, three strangers appear at Abraham's tent and promise him the impossible, which is that he and his wife Sarah will finally have their own son, even though they almost a hundred and ninety years old, respectively. They had desperately wanted to have a child together for a long time. Twenty-five years earlier in their lives, God had even appeared to them when they were already old and promised them a child. And trusting that promise, they had obeyed God and left everything they had known – their country, their family, their security- to go to the land God would show them. Then over the years God had promised them a child multiple times. But after a long time of waiting with no child, they had eventually come up with Plan B. Sarah had asked Abraham to have a child with Sarah's slave Hagar, which he did, and Sarah claimed that child Ishmael as her own. Ishmael was their best alternative to their dream to have a child together.

So now, twenty five years after they had left everything in response to God's call, these three pesky men show up and again promise them a son.

Sarah is listening at the door. And she laughs. It was way too late for that. She was eighty nine years old, they had long since moved on; they had Ishmael which was good enough. So she laughs, and I imagine there was some cynicism or bitterness there for her.

What have you done when you've had a dream or a hope, but it's way too late for that dream to be fulfilled? Maybe you've been hoping for many years that your alcoholic adult child would finally get sober and stable and begin to repair the damage in his or her life, but it hasn't happened. Maybe you thought God was calling you to be a repairer of the breach in this world, to do meaningful things, but you're stuck in a job that sucks the life out of you. Maybe you've spent your entire life working for justice and the kingdom of God in this world, but you just watched people happily chanting about sending Ilhan Omar back to Somalia, and you saw the DHS Inspector General's reports about conditions in the detention centers at the border, and you are more dismayed and discouraged and scared than you can say. In all of these cases, it seems to me that you have in common with Sarah is that despite your absolute 100% best efforts, you have not been able to accomplish something really important to you – something that is even good and life-giving and that even seems to be something God would approve of, to the extent we can ever know the mind of God. So when a kind and well-meaning person says something like “Just trust God,” or “everything happens for the best,” or even “I think you can do this,” it would be easy to laugh it off. After a long time of trying your best and failing, you just have to accept the things you cannot change. Hopefully you also have the courage to change the things you can and the wisdom to know the difference, as the serenity prayer says. But maybe you just come up with your best substitute for the thing you really want. You have your Plan B, your Ishmael.

But in this scripture, the three men are making an actual birth announcement about new life that God is going to bring about. Sarah can't see it yet. She is still stuck in the place of cynical laughter. But the scriptures say that one year later, she does have a son, Isaac, whose name means "he laughs." Sarah's heart's desire, the one thing she wanted, finally happens against all odds. Sarah's cynical laughter turns into the laugh of delight, amazement, surprise. The joke is on them.

Now in case you haven't figured this out by now I have an overactive imagination, so I was thinking about what must have happened in between Sarah's initial cynical laughter and the birth of her son. Now I might get fired at this point for pointing this out from the pulpit, but bear with me. Remember that Abraham and Sarah were nearly 100 and 90 years old. I'm guessing that in addition to Sarah having long since passed menopause, that certain activities between them had ceased to occur. But we all know what the prerequisites are for giving birth to a child. My point is, something moved Abraham and Sarah from the place of safe, cynical laughter, to the place of being willing to engage in love and vulnerability with each other again. And what followed was indeed the miracle they hoped for. Eventually they saw, unmistakably, that Sarah was pregnant, even though that was impossible. She was pregnant and she gave birth to Isaac, whose name means he laughs, and they were laughing with joy.

This incredibly important foundational story is about how God brings impossible new life when it is too late. Now this obviously isn't true for all of our deep desires, all of our dreams. I wish it were. But there are some dreams, some of our yearnings, that align with God's dream for shalom and justice and blessing for all people without exception. Sarah's deep yearning for a child was aligned with God's promise to give her a child who would be the agent of blessing for the whole world. What if this story is asking us to

face that we actually are not satisfied with our own best substitutes for the life of God? Our best substitutes actually leave us dry and unsatisfied and aching. But it's really painful to admit that, because allowing ourselves to hope again is terrifying. What if we get disappointed again? What if there really is no future with new life and love and laughter and justice in it?

That is where Sarah was, and that is where we are, so often. What are your best substitutes for God's life and wholeness and healing? What if we could risk recognizing how inadequate our best substitutes are, and how much we really do yearn for God's justice, God's healing and reconciliation in this world – even though these things are beyond our power to accomplish? At first it might seem that we can't risk that disappointment. But what if we could imagine that our own deep desires are in alignment with God's purposes for wholeness and life for all people? Maybe, just maybe, miracles are still possible.

What would it be like to let ourselves dream outrageous dreams of God's blessing for all people? We could risk daring to hope that with God's help, we *can* make a difference for those children at the border. We could dare to imagine that church doesn't have to just be a mildly worthwhile spiritual social club, but a deeply energizing Beloved Community in which we are known, and healed, and nourished to follow Jesus' Way of Love in the world. What if God really does give each of us gifts and dreams, not just for us, but for the sake of the world God so loves?

Let's pretend that we, together, could do these things. I think that what comes next, is that we become willing to risk engaging love and vulnerability again. We tell our stories to each other, and wonder where God's Spirit is moving in them. We move from cynicism to a lightness of heart, and the capacity to laugh at ourselves. We risk experimenting and

innovating and daring to believe in a future that is not possible for us, but is possible for God. We begin to see the undeniable signs of new life, of genuine change, the sprouts of the Kingdom of God, all around us. Then we might experience what the Psalmist says about the people of Israel in exile, whose fortunes had finally been restored: “Then were we like those who dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”¹ If we dare to let go of our Plan B, our best substitutes for God’s new life, we can dare to dream impossible dreams. Because God is still bringing about impossible new life, making something out of nothing, healing the world. Amen.

¹ Psalm 126:1-2.