

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Genesis 18:1-15

Sermon Title: "Emotions May Draw Us to God" (Mother's Day 2017)

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{SLIDE 1 TITLE} It has been several years now since I've been able to speak with my next-door neighbor and her son together. Her son is a young adult and has moved away because of his work. But when I spoke with them several years ago, he was without work. My next-door neighbor's son was nearly at the end of a rope, trying to figure out what to do with himself. He talked to his mom several times about what he could do and where he could go. He prayed numerous times with God about his life, but he hadn't received any clear answer.

We all just happened to be outside one day, just happened to be in our front yards. We said hello to each other, and I shook the son's hand, and I simply asked how things were going. Both of them told me the story of his struggle, and how it was bothering him that God seemed to be silent.

So I told Henry (that's the son's name) to be bold before God. Tell God how you feel. Tell God that you really need an answer. I told him to get angry with God, show some emotion, be dead honest that you are

frustrated and that you truly want to follow God's will for your life. Get angry, if you need to.

This solicited a response from my next-door neighbor, the mom. "You can't get angry with God," she told me. "Isn't it a sin to be angry with God?" I told her no, it isn't. It is okay to show emotion. It is okay to get in touch with how we feel and to share such feelings with God, especially if we are frustrated, and miserable. She still didn't like it. She didn't like that her next-door neighbor/pastor told her son to get angry with God. I encouraged him to be honest with God about everything, and then expect God to answer as God will answer. Not much else was said on the topic. Henry, the son, is now gone and doing very well with construction. Maybe he did show some emotion to God, and God opened the path for him?

{SLIDE 2} Maybe we have a problem with showing emotion to God. Maybe we don't. God knows how we feel anyhow, so why not let it out? Why not let God see how we truly feel? We may feel uncomfortable showing emotions with God, especially if that emotion is anger. Maybe we learned as children that to be angry with God is a sin. We should never be angry, or God may punish us. So we will not show anger: we will not bear our teeth and furl our eyebrows at God.

Sadness is also an emotion, but we might feel okay

with sharing sadness with God. God will not punish us, if we shed a tear in front of him. Many people in the Bible cried before God, and God had pity on them. Even the sinful woman who crashed a party in Luke 7, who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, and kissed them, and poured perfume on them: Jesus didn't condemn her for showing sadness. He had compassion for her, blessed her, and told her that her faith had saved her from her sin.¹ So sadness might be an emotion we could get away with, if we share it with God.

{SLIDE 3} What about laughter? Have we ever shared laughter with God? Not so much laughed at what God did for us, but laughed at God? Laughed in God's face? Treated whatever promise that God would share with us as a joke? Have we ever dared to laugh at God? Sarah did once. Sarah laughed at God and tried to keep it to herself. But God heard it. God questioned her laughter.

{SLIDE 4} The story we read today begins simply enough. Three men stop by the tent of Abraham.² Abraham catches sight of them, and runs out to them to offer them some food and some rest. This is basic Middle Eastern hospitality. When a person looks out

¹ Cf. Luke 7:36-50.

² Cf. Genesis 18:1-5.

from his home and sees people on the road, he stops those people to see if they are okay. He gives them some food and maybe a blanket or two. He offers them a place to sit and even a place to sleep, if the hour is late. People did this all the time, because traveling from one place to another took a long time. It isn't as though people were driving cars from place to place with only an hour or so to go. People in Abraham's and Sarah's time traveled on foot. The next town might be far away and take days to reach. So when an owner of a tent saw travelers, he stopped them and helped them out.

There shouldn't be much more to the story after this: Abraham welcoming in a couple of guys. But it is what the three travelers have to share with Abraham. It seems they came to Abraham's tent with a specific purpose. Who knows who the men were. Three angels? The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? They sit down with Abraham, while Sarah goes off to make some food.³

They ask Abraham where his wife Sarah is. How do they know her name is Sarah? Aren't these three travelers that have come out of nowhere, the men that Abraham has never been before? Abraham doesn't seem to pick up on the strangeness of the question, so

³ Cf. Genesis 18:6-8.

he just answers, “There, in the tent, making food for us.” The one traveler continues: “I will surely return to you next year, and at that time Sarah will have a son.”⁴ It is one thing for the traveler to come by Abraham’s tent in one year so Abraham could make preparations for such a visit, but it is another thing for the traveler to say he will come by in a year AND your wife will have a son.

{SLIDE 5} Abraham and Sarah have been waiting for a son to arrive. It has been so many years since God first promised that they would have children. God called both of them out of their homeland, out of familiar territory, and sent them on a journey. And the first thing God promised on that journey was for Abraham and Sarah to take care of a little one. Back in Genesis 12 it all started: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”⁵ Periodically God would reaffirm that Abraham and Sarah would become pregnant. “I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. There will be so many of them they will be like the sands on the seashore.”⁶ A son will arrive – just you wait.

{SLIDE 6} Now it has been 24 years.⁷ When the

⁴ Genesis 18:9-10.

⁵ Verse 2.

⁶ Genesis 22:17. Of course, this promise came after Abraham and Sarah had their child.

⁷ Compare Genesis 12:4 with Genesis 21:5.

three travelers arrive in Genesis 18 it has been 24 years since God made that first promise. And Abraham and Sarah are no spring chickens. Back in Genesis 12, when Abraham and Sarah started the journey from their homeland, they are around 75 years old. It wasn't like they were 20 or 25. They were 75. And God promises both septuagenarian that they would eventually have a son. At age 75 you have a grandson or granddaughter. Unless you are Mick Jagger, you do not have children in the middle of your 70s.

You definitely do not have children in your late 90s either, for this is how old both Abraham and Sarah are when three men come to visit, when one man says he will stop by next year and Sarah will have a child in her arms. What is one year compared to 24 years, especially if a person is young? At that time Sarah conceives, she will be around 100. At that age people should have great-grandchildren running around.

{SLIDE 7} Now the story makes a shift. We go from three men making a bold statement to Sarah laughing at that bold statement. All attention is now on Sarah who is on the other side of the tent making a meal. She heard all the words that were said, and the comment about having a baby makes her chuckle. We should laugh, too. She is around 99 years old. No 99-

year-old ever gives birth. A year later she will be 100, but still a woman that age should not think of having children. We should laugh, too. Now God is finally coming around to fulfilling his promise. Finally God is going to allow Abraham and Sarah to hold a child of their own. When a promise is made, it is usually fulfilled soon afterward. If a parent promises to allow a son or daughter to use the car, that promise usually happens over a weekend. When a parent promises the son and daughter a graduation party, plans were probably made in January or February, and they will be complete in May or June. Not many people make promises and then fulfill them 25 years later. People forget the promise was ever made 25 years later. We should laugh that God is finally coming around to honoring it.

{SLIDE 8} However, there is more to this laugh of Sarah's. She doesn't laugh because she thinks she heard a joke. She laugh because she has no faith in God to fulfill the promise. She laughs out of lack of faith, or even no faith at all, in God.

Consider Sarah's desperate situation. She was told for years that she would have a child. "A boy is coming, just you wait," is all she heard, and nothing came of it. She got so frustrated with this empty promise that she made a deal with her husband. "I

have a handmaiden,” Sarah told him in Genesis 16. “Her name is Hagar. She have a child with her and we will call him our child.” This is how the promised will be fulfilled. If God cannot do it, Sarah is force the situation and make it happen.

{SLIDE 9} It does happen. Hagar has a son by Abraham, and they call him Isaac. But the boy is not Sarah’s boy. She does not feel like the promise of God has been fulfilled. She believes her handmaiden is becoming arrogant with bearing a child, while Sarah has not. Sarah demands Abraham to do something about it, and Hagar is thrown out. She is kicked out of the tent to give birth on her own. Sarah is not happy. She does not think the plan went well, and she is still without a son. God has not fulfilled his promise. How can you believe in a God who doesn’t smile down on you?

{SLIDE 10} Year in and year out, it has to work on a person. Year in and year out of praying, and the prayers don’t seem to go anywhere. Year in and year out hearing about God’s love, God’s protection, God’s grace, and not seeming to have it for your own. It is like God has forgotten you. It is as though God is playing games and will continue to play games until you are totally frustrated.

There is not much faith in God. There may be no faith in God for Sarah over the last 24 years. She has

to laugh because the one traveler sounds like he is making another promise that will never come to be. Another word from God to goes out empty and produces nothing.

{SLIDE 11} We can tell that Sarah laughs out of lack of faith, because she hides the laugh when called on it. The question is asked, “Why did Sarah laugh?” and she answers, “I didn’t laugh.” The reply is, “yes you did.” The conversation could have kept going on and on: “No, I didn’t.” “Yes, you did.” “No, I didn’t.” “Yes, you did.”

We turn now to verse 13 of our story, and it says, “The Lord asked Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh?’” Notice that we are talking about three travelers visiting Abraham anymore. Not even the pronoun “they” is being used to illustrate that there are three men present with Abraham. All of a sudden we see the word “Lord,” and it is the Lord who is talking to Abraham, asking the question, “Why did Sarah laugh?” God is involved with the situation. God has been involved the whole time.

Sarah’s laughter shows her lack of faith, and even the absence of faith, and God knows it. So God asks the question, and God is going to prove to Sarah that he keeps his promises, and God will turn Sarah’s laughter into her opportunity to gain faith in God. Her

laughter shows lack of faith or no faith, but her laughter also becomes the starting point for her to get some faith.

{SLIDE 12} In Genesis 21, three chapters later, it says that God deals with Sarah as he said, and he does for Sarah as he promised.⁸ God gives her a son. Sarah is 100 years old, and the promise took 25 years to be completed. That should make any of us laugh. Even after a long period of time, God is faithful to Sarah. God brings about his promises at exactly the time God wants to. Now Sarah has a baby in her old age, and she feels the blessing of family surrounding her. Now Sarah is the fulfillment of God's promises, and she acknowledges the God who says what God says and does what God does. Her faith is growing. Her faith is getting stronger. She can trust God will watch over her. She can trust God will continue to direct her and her husband to whichever place they should go. Sarah is doing so much better in her faith that the son's name actually means Laughter.⁹ Isaac is the boy's name, and it means Laughter in Hebrew. Sarah says, "God has brought laughter for me, and everyone who hears will laugh with me."¹⁰

She doesn't have to lie about her laughter. She

⁸ Verses 1-2.

⁹ Cf. Genesis 21:3.

¹⁰ Genesis 21:6.

doesn't have to cover it up. Sarah holds laughter in her arms. She expresses laughter with a broad mouth and smiling eyes. In Genesis 18, when she stands on the other side of the tent, laughter is a moment of embarrassment. Yet in Genesis 21, when Isaac is born, her laughter is a sign of belief. Her laughter is a sign of joy in the One who promises and makes it happen, all to God's glory. The emotion that showed her lack of faith becomes the emotion that proves her faith in God will remain steadfast. She will enjoy God's blessings and she will enjoy God for the rest of her life.

{SLIDE 13} Do we feel comfortable with sharing our emotions with God? God knows how we feel anyhow. No matter how much we try to bury them, God can plainly see how we feel. So why not share them? Why not get angry or sad, why not become a little frustrated, why not laugh at God when our faith is weak? Sharing such emotions is not a sin, if we truly want God to help us, if we place our trust solely in God to get us through the struggles.

I never asked, but I would like to think that my next-door neighbor's son got a little upset with God when he couldn't figure out his future, that he boldly bore his true emotions in front of God, asking, pleading for God to show him the way, and God did

just that. I would like to think God honored his emotions, and God took my neighbor's son to the places he should go.

We can bear our emotions in front of God. I would think God desires it, because God wants us to be honest with him all the time. Not just the laughter and the joy, but also the rawer emotions, the ones that may embarrass us if we express them. God can take it. God is big enough to bear all our emotions all at once, if we could do that. God wants us to be honest, God wants us to seek him all the time, and God want to prove that his promises will always be fulfilled for our greater good.

Sharing emotions just may be the springboard to finding God, and figuring out what God wants us to do, and glorifying God for loving us every step of the way.

Assurance of Pardon:

Listen to this Good News: “If we claim that we’re free from sin, we’re only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is absolute nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins – be honest and open about them – God won’t let us down. God will forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing.” Since we confessed our sins, God will forgive us through his Son Jesus Christ and bring us into the light of his salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.