

Believing the Unbelievable

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-19 *Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"*

Romans 4:13-25 *He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.*

Mark 8:31-38 *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

Our readings for today are full of preposterous things. An old man being called on a physical and spiritual journey when he was ninety-nine years of age. His wife, perhaps his equal in age, being the mother of yet another child. And Jesus, the messiah of God, the one who was supposed to install God's kingdom in place of the oppressive kingdoms of human creation, going forward to suffering, rejection, and death, and then some kind of new life. No wonder Abraham laughed. No wonder Peter got upset. How can a man and woman who are great grandparent age have another child? How can someone who is supposed to be God's messiah to save us go the way of defeat and death?

Abraham is ninety-nine years old when God tells him that he is to be the partner in a new venture, a covenant with God, that will bring blessings to coming generations. Abraham is way too old for this sort of foolishness! He should be enjoying what little life he has left in him. When he was seventy-five, God had done the same thing, out of the blue. Called him to go on a journey to some unknown land and to be a sojourner, a person on a journey of faith. Wasn't that enough? Wouldn't Abraham now be thinking, Surely God is asking too much. Let me rest. Give me a break. I've done my bit. Now it's time to sit and enjoy the sunset each day.

Then God tells Abraham that Sarai is going to have a new name—Sarah. More than that, God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child. At this Abraham has a good laugh to himself. So God says that the child will be born and the child's name will be Isaac, which means "laughter." The name of the child will be a constant reminder to Abraham that he did not believe God could do such a thing.

Some centuries later, the prophet Joel wrote these words from God:

*Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.*

How easily we get caught up in conventional thinking! When you are young, you have energy and ideals and spunk. That is the time to try new things and to be open to possibilities. But as we get older, it's time to settle down, physically and spiritually. Fall into our comfortable routines. Rest from the labors of our younger years. It's just too much trouble to think new thoughts or go off on wild goose chases.

But with God there is no such thing as the habitual. Anything can happen at any time. And to be people who are spiritually open to God, who are willing to go to that deeper level of the life of the spirit and not the calendar or clock, life is ready to break forth into adventure and newness at any time. And we need to be ready to go with it. That's faith. That's what Abraham finally did. He got the laughing over with, but then sucked it up and said, Okay, one more time. Here we go, God.

That's what impressed Paul about Abraham. He wrote to the church in Rome a whole bunch about what faith is. It isn't what you believe in your heads. It has nothing to do with holding a set of beliefs or doctrines that some church authority tells you are the right ones. How boring! How lifeless! No. Faith is taking God at God's word, getting over our incredulousness, and moving out into this new thing God is doing. I like the way Paul put it about Abraham. Look, he says, Abraham was as good as dead. He was nearly a hundred years old. He had at least one foot in the grave, for gosh sake's. But there he went, one more time, out into the unknown, into God's new thing. That's what we are about if we are following Jesus. There's no pattern. There's no roadmap. There's no neatly laid out program for spiritual advancement or religious accomplishment. Faith means living a life that is open to the movements of God's spirit and then drawing a deep breath and going with it.

What about Jesus? He is telling the disciples that the Son of Man has to undergo great suffering and be rejected by the religious establishment and be killed. After three days he will rise again. Peter can't hear that. That's crazy talk. Peter had signed up for a cruise on to victory, a successful religious movement that would sweep away the oppressive powers of politics and religion. That's what the messiah was supposed to do, bring in a new day, a new rule, throwing out the old guard.

Here Jesus is talking about the way of suffering and rejection and death, not power grabbing and gaining status. I think he just missed the part about Jesus rising from death. He was too stunned by the suffering and rejection bit. So he takes Jesus to task, tries to set him straight on how a real messiah is supposed to act. For his trouble, Peter gets a harsh reprimand from Jesus. Get behind me, Satan! Calls him Satan, one who tries to tempt folks away from God's ways. Tells him to get out of the way. You are thinking in human terms, not God's terms. You have an old mind, not the new mind.

Jesus then goes on to say even more astounding things. If you want to follow me, you have to deny yourself, take up your own cross and follow me in the way I am going, not the ways you think are successful. If you want to save your life, if you try to hang onto your life and grasp your life, you will lose it. You have to let go. You have to give yourself for my sake and the sake of the good news of God's kingdom, God's order of things. If you spend your efforts trying to gain the world, pad your nest, build up equity and secure your life, you will lose your life in the process. You think you are getting something, but you are losing something.

I said last week that repentance means changing our minds, thinking in new ways, waking up from illusions. Here is an example of Peter's not having yet gone through repentance, this change of mind, of thinking. To follow Jesus is to have our minds blown. It is to let go of hanging onto fixed ideas of the way things ought to be and ought to go. It is letting go of the ideas of success and failure we have been fed on from childhood. And it is to let go of all the clinging to things we think bring us security, but in reality only fill our lives with anxiety and fear and defensiveness.

It all comes back to the meaning of faith, faith as trustful, open living. Faith is seeing with our hearts more than our eyes, trusting the spiritual center of ourselves—call it the soul, or spirit, or whatever—as we grow in our sensitivity to God's presence and leading. Finally, Jesus put it so succinctly. The fullness of life is found not by hanging onto our lives but by letting go. Mark Russell was telling me about a dream he had recently. Part of the dream was this line that came to him: "In all the times of hanging on, it's letting go that got me through." I told him that would make a great song, something kind of bluegrass gospel maybe! But that is what Jesus was talking about. It is not by fiercely hanging onto life that we find life but by learning what it means to let go, to live with open hands, open minds, and open hearts.