

As lengthy as our first lesson today is, this story of the Lord visiting Abraham at Mamre leaves out the things that are most important to the story. Clearly our lectionary assumes you will remember that, at age 75, God had told Abraham to leave Haran and set out on a journey to (literally) only-God-knew-where. And God had told Abraham that he would be the father of many nations with descendants too many to count. And here are Abraham and his only wife Sarah—still childless 24 years later—at Mamre, which surely you will know is where both Abraham and Sarah will eventually be buried after buying a plot of land there among the Jebusites, the Amorites, and the Hittites. Abraham and Sarah have traipsed all OVER Palestine, with not a child to call their own, and not a nation to call their own.



Given all this unstated information, we have to wonder, as Sarah clearly wonders: “Does God keep God’s promises, or not?”

You and I know the answer to this question, don’t we? At least in theory? We are, after all, not the ones who are 89 and 99 years old, ready for the grave. We are, after all, not the ones who are childless, with no legacy that we can perceive. We are, after all, convinced that the God is absolutely faithful and that our descendants will be too numerous to number. Like Abraham, WE are convinced that “God keeps God’s promises.” Aren’t we?

SARAH’s the skeptic here, isn’t she? And maybe we can understand Sarah’s pain. Logically speaking, we know, like Sarah knew, that as a post-menopausal woman, **she** wasn’t likely to be birth mother of the children God had promised. We know how the story turns out, like Sarah knew her husband, so we know that Abraham would begin to try to “help” God keep God’s promise. Sarah knew, like we know, that very soon Abraham would stop waiting for God to fulfill his promise and father Ishmael with Sarah’s handmaid Hagar. Did you notice that in reaching for a totally happy ending to report, our lesson today left THAT part of the story out, too?

So maybe we can forgive Sarah for remaining in her tent when the Lord came to call. Yes, we know that women didn’t get to eat with men back then. But would Sarah have left her bed of bitterness for the Lord himself?

Even Abraham didn't recognize the three visitors for who they were, at first. But did you notice how hard Abraham worked at showing them hospitality? He ran to meet them. He ran to get Sarah busy making bread. He ran to the herd, picked out a fatted calf, and ran to get a servant to slaughter and cook the calf. Then he ran some more and milked a goat and made cheese and scooped up the bread and meat and milk served the strangers lunch. I once saw a biblical storyteller enact this lesson and I was exhausted when she was done.

Did you notice that the strangers knew too much? One called Sarah by name and said that Sarah would have a child that year. That's when Sarah, who had been listening from her tent, laughed. Not a laugh of joy, you understand, but a bitter laugh.

I've laughed Sarah's bitter laugh; haven't you?

"Where ARE you, God, while our world gets crazier and crazier? You've promised us life. Can't you see that we are DYING here?"

No, actually that's a theoretical bitter laugh. In times past my bitter laugh was: "You've called me to be a priest. And you've called me to live, work, and worship in Virginia, where I cannot be a priest. You do know, don't you Lord, that there is a much friendlier diocese just over there on the other side of the Potomac River?"

**Sarah's** bitter laugh was because she could not bear the child God had promised to give her. But if Sarah hadn't been post-menopausal and—did you catch this in our scripture reading today—no longer having sex with Abraham, then HOW would we know that this was GOD keeping God's promise and not just a coincidence?

So what does a 4,000-year-old story of a barren woman with bitter laugh giving birth have to do with us? Besides the reality that we—each of us here and a very large percentage of the people on our planet—count Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors?

We, I contend, are a childless people. Maybe you've noticed that Church of the Resurrection doesn't have children. Oh, we have a few, who we treasure, individually and collectively. And we thank you, their parents, for letting us grandparent them. But by and large, children are hidden away here during worship, while we have spent decades in search of the "holy grail" of children.

"If only we had more children..." we used to say.

This is a guilt-free Sunday, by the way. My goal is NOT to heap guilt on you. Quite the contrary. I want to give you great praise. You've been faithful; you've done your part. I give thanks that we have

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stopped trying to “help” God give us what we think we need to ensure our survival and let God worry about that. I give thanks that we rely on God’s promise: “I will never leave you or forsake you...”

I know that you will quote Theresa of Avilla to me, “God has no hands but ours.” Or you’ll quote our mission statement and tell me that our hands are to accomplish God’s work in our community. Both are true. But we need to ensure that the work we give our hands to do really is God’s work and not our own.

When we “help” God by not waiting for God to act, we forget that God keeps God’s promises and begin to think that instead, “The Lord helps those who help themselves.” And once we began to think and act on THAT particular heresy, before long we would be shooting those we disagree with, not just shooting them but killing them in the so-called Name of the Lord.

Shifting gears a bit, before we eat Bubba Burgers today and drink root beer in honor of our dads, I want to tell you that the three visitors who ate Abraham’s food under the oak tree at Mamre (those very same visitors) have been at Resurrection recently. Those very three look a lot younger today; they appear as middle school students who live in apartments in Newport Village with their families (who don’t attend church). They just showed up one Sunday last month after I tried to “help” God. I don’t know whether they will continue to attend, as they have for the past several weeks. I hope so. They remind us to treat all strangers as if they were the Lord himself. Because today’s lesson reminds us that God shows up in our world whenever and wherever God wants, in surprising ways, in ways we don’t always recognize at first, but often in the form of a stranger.

Today’s lesson also assures me that God keeps God’s promises. Not on my timetable and not with my “help,” but in abundant and improbable ways.

What promises are you waiting for God to fulfill?