

Did they run out and buy a crib? Did they set up the nursery, and start to talk about names? Did she start to make baby clothes? God promised a son to Abram and Sarai, as they were known then, if they would only leave their secure life and begin the journey of faith. What couple who desperately wanted a child could possibly resist at least getting a crib? Their excitement had to have been overflowing because finally they would be parents. But this wasn't just about a baby. The promise from God was that they were being blessed to be a blessing.

It was 24 years ago that God made that promise. Since then, Abram and Sarai had pretty much done their part. They pulled up stakes to begin the journey behind God, from one place to the next, never settling anywhere for long. And before each move they always had to disassemble that empty crib. Now Abram is 99 and Sarai was 89. They have good times and hard times on the journey, but what they haven't had is a child. I imagine after the last several moves they stopped reassembling the crib.

You too know about dreams that have not worked out as you had hoped on the journey of life - dreams for your relationships, work, or the impact your life would make. Early on, there was a lot of expectation. But after a while and a whole lot of disappointment it gets hard to keep unpacking the dream. So you just leave it tucked away in a closed off corner of the heart, cope the best you can with the daily-ness of life, and tell yourself to deal with reality.

Sarai's way of dealing with reality was to encourage Abram to have a baby with her handmaid Hagar. This practice is beyond offensive to our contemporary minds because of the ways it abused the handmaid, which is certainly done in this story. But using a wife's handmaid to get a child was common in ancient society. It was never a couple's dream, but they would tell themselves sometimes you just have to try to make your own blessing, even if someone gets hurt. The boy born to Abram and Hagar, named Ishmael, is now 13 years old.

On one of those many ordinary days into which Abram and Sarai had settled, God suddenly appeared once again. As soon as Abram realized it was God who was speaking, he fell on his face in worship. The first thing God did was proclaim that this God was El Shaddai, which translates as "God of the mountains" or "God Almighty." The second thing God did was to change Abram's name to Abraham, which means "Father of a multitude of nations." At this point Abraham is standing back up. In fact, I imagine he is standing pretty tall thinking, "Yes, you can just call me the father of many nations. I knew God would bless Ishmael. I just had to tailor down the expectations."

Isn't this how we handle the incredible promises of God? Don't we learn to reduce them to something reasonable, which we can obtain on our own and then ask God to bless? But when we come to church and hear the amazing promises of God reaffirmed, we assume that our busy but vaguely dissatisfying lives must be what God means by a blessing. It wasn't our early idea of a blessing, but like Abraham eventually we tell ourselves it's time to deal with reality. But God is never impressed with our notions of reality.

God continues to speak to Abraham and says, "Oh, and I am also changing Sari's name to Sarah because, don't forget, she is going to have a baby with you." Now Abraham falls back on his face again, but the text tells us this time it's because he is laughing too hard to stay standing. "What? We're having a what? I was impressed I had a child with Hagar when I was 86." I'm paraphrasing here. His exact words were, "Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Can Sarah who is 90 years old bear a child?"

The very first sermon I gave as a young seminarian, was on this text. Unfortunately, I was preaching in a nursing home. I thought I was just being relevant. Many of the residents were in wheelchairs. Some of them

could barely hear me. But I pressed ahead and pointed out that Abraham and Sarah were a lot older than most of them. “Imagine that,” I said, “You can all still have babies!” They did not receive this as good news. One woman actually interrupted the sermon and yelled “Preposterous.” Of course, she got the message exactly right. This news is so preposterous.

But the most vivid memory I have of that experience was after the residents had left, the middle-aged chaplain of the home said to me, “You know, I’ve always wanted a baby but had given up hope. How literally do you think we should take this?” Sadly, I responded “Well, I don’t know. I was just preaching. I think a lot of people want babies and never get them.”

Of course, that is true. People die even though we pray for them to be healed. Marriages break apart in spite of hard work at reconciliation. We don’t always get the wonderful job we pray to receive. In spite of all our missionary and relief efforts the world is still torn apart by war and violence. And the church is often part of the problem with hope in society. This week the Southern Baptist Convention, representing the largest Protestant denomination in the country, voted to expel all of its congregations who had ordained women in leadership. This from a tradition that believes in the priesthood of all believers. What century are we living in?

But we cannot give up on the church any more than we can the world. We are a people who have to have hope, even when hope sounds preposterous. That’s not because it makes us feel good, but because we live by our deep conviction God is not done! God is not done with your life. God is not done with the church. And God is not done with the world that suffers under so much injustice.

The most powerful reason we have for this hope is that God came to be with us in Jesus Christ. After all Jesus has done, after he died for our sins, including the sins of settling, and after he rose from the dead and ascending to reign over creation - who knows what one with such power may do in our lives? Are you really going to look at this incarnate God, Christ the King, and tell him to be realistic? It is God who creates reality. And with God all things are possible.

A little later a few angels stopped by Abraham’s tent to tell him God was serious about his wife having his baby. Sarah overheard the preposterous news through the walls of the tent, and this time she was the one who started laughing. In response, God asked Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” And that really is the question when it comes to our dreams isn’t it?

The art on the front cover of the bulletin was provided by Rebecca Thornburgh, as she always does. It is such a gift to our worship services. Today’s art depicts a painting by Casper David Friedrich titled, “The Monk By the Sea.” As Friedrich often did in his paintings, we find a diminished solitary person standing in the midst of a magnificent landscape. As you ponder this little monk staring in the vast mysterious, awe-inspiring creation enveloping him, you have to wonder if maybe a tattered old dream was coming back to life and he too was wondering, “Is anything too Wonderful for El Shaddai, the God Almighty?”

Our calling is not to worry if we will receive the dream. That’s up to God. Our calling is to throw ourselves into dreams worthy of us, and to allow them to mold and shape our lives.

It is significant that God changes Abraham and Sarah’s name before their baby is born. This illustrates the truth that our identity is shaped more by God’s promise than by its fulfillment. When everything is coming apart at the seams, or when you are lost in the dust and grit of the ordinary and dull, and life seems anything but blessed, it is then that you make the most important decisions that effect the depth of your soul. Souls that have gravitas choose to believe the promise: “He who hath begun a good work will bring it to completion.” That isn’t hard to believe when everything is going great. But when like Abraham and Sarah you have spent years and years waiting, the choice to still say “Is anything too wonderful?” shapes your life. And it makes you a blessing.

Again, the promised blessing for Abraham and Sarah wasn't just in having a baby. It was that they were blessed to be a blessing, which is our calling as well. The blessing that the world needs from the church is for us to believe in what we claim to believe. In a day in which despair is easy, let this be the church's reputation – that we are a people trying to bless the world with our preposterous hope. That's the hope that pushes us out of the church into mission, hopeful service, and witness to our dreams of peace and justice. But we are useless to the world without hope, even and especially when hope seems laughable.

It is striking that God does not judge Abraham and Sarah for their laughter. To the contrary, God seems to join the hilarity by telling them to go ahead and name their son Isaac, which means laughter. You have to believe that after Isaac was born and grew into a child, every time Abraham or Sarah called Laughter to come in for dinner, they broke out in the biggest smile and they remembered, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

There is an important epilogue to the story. According to our text, not only did God bless Isaac, but also Ishmael. God promised to make a great nation of both of these sons. Today the great Jewish nation of Isaac and the great Arabic nation of Ishmael are having a very difficult time living together in the Middle East. It would be realistic to say, "They have never lived in peace. There will always be violence between them." Maybe. But it would also be possible to say that they have both been blessed by God. So we will continue to pray, and work, and dream of peace.

Is that preposterous? Absolutely. But the last thing you ever want to tell God is to be realistic. Amen.