

Sermon (2/25/18, Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16):

In the early days of the Star Trek television series, Scotty was the chief engineer who somehow always managed to squeeze just enough power out of the ship's damaged engines to save the day. It did not, however, come without resistance. As Captain Kirk would plead with Scotty, saying it was now or never, Scotty's oft quoted response was, 'I cannot change the laws of physics, Captain! A've got to have thirty minutes!'

When I was in College, business majors, like myself, were required to take some type of science class for their degree. One of the most popular ones was a Physics Class for Business Majors. In other words, 'Physics for Dummies'.

One of the laws of nature he taught us was that whenever a force was exerted on an object, the object would push back with equal force. For many of us, we had never thought about pushing against something quite in those terms. If we pushed something and it didn't move it was because it was too heavy... end of story. An inanimate object pushing back, well, that just seemed kind of silly.

One person in our class was bold enough to express his skepticism. Our teacher asked him to come to the front of the class to help him demonstrate the law's validity. Once in front, he told the student to bend over and run, head first, as fast as he could, into the cinder block wall. Thankfully, the student didn't do it. We all laughed and, like so many of the laws of physics he taught us, we were reminded that this was a law we innately understood even though we hadn't quite thought about it in those terms before.

All of us have an instinctive sense of what is possible and not so possible within the sphere of life on this planet. There are just some unchangeable laws about this life that must be adhered to.

Perhaps, this is one of the things that makes life with God so incredibly challenging. Many times, God's covenants just seem so outlandish, so beyond the boundaries of earthly possibility that they border hilarity.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would

bear God's son, she didn't laugh, at least according to the scriptural account, but she did voice her skepticism. 'Really?' She said. 'How could this be? I might only be a kid but don't be fooled. I took that sex education class in school and I know that there are certain things that need to happen for a pregnancy and, believe me, they haven't happened!'

The angel simply said, 'With God nothing is impossible'.

In some ways, Mary had it easy when compared to Abraham and Sarah. At least she was young enough for pregnancy to be a possibility and, at least, she didn't have to wait long for it to happen.

Poor Abraham and Sarah weren't afforded such a luxury. It started back when Abraham was 75 years old and his wife, Sarah, was 66. Not exactly an age when a couple considers striking out for parts unknown to begin a new chapter in their lives, inclusive of starting a family. Yet, that's exactly what God told them to do.

You can almost hear Scotty in the background – 'What? Do you know the laws of biology, God? Have you not considered that these two people are card carrying AARP members?'

Well, Abraham was not quite as vocal as Scotty was, but I can't help but to believe he was thinking something along these lines. None the less, to his and Sarah's credit, being more faithful than I tend to be, they did as God instructed.

Which brings us to today's story - 24 years later. Abraham is now 99 years old and Sarah is 90. Twenty-four years ago, they took God's word for it, believing that, somehow, God would defy the laws of biology and provide them with an heir. So far, nothing. Patience is one thing, but this surely bordered the ridiculous.

From the start, Abraham and Sarah were in a place of anticipating that their best years were behind them. They had already double checked their wills and downsized to an apartment with a handicap accessible bathroom. The last thing on their minds was imagining themselves to be the start of this new and revolutionary thing God was about to do.

They went along with it, though. They made the journey God led them upon. They made mistakes along the way. They met up with numerous challenges. They even tried to take matters into their own hands

at one point—making Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid, a surrogate mother for Abraham’s offspring which led to the birth of Ishmael.

Twenty-four years later they were still waiting. Now Abraham is 99 years old and Sarah 90. Again, God shows up, reiterating his promise to make Abraham the ancestor of a multitude of nations. Abraham’s response? He fell on his face, overcome by laughter.

Abraham laughed. Sarah laughed. God did not, and, because of that, we know that we might as well head to the cigar store because, like it or not, believe it or not, Abraham and Sarah are about to become proud new parents. Just wait until their neighbors at their Assisted Living Complex see this!

During Lent, our focus tends to be on the need for us to come to terms with our own failings and messes – individually, corporately, and systemically. It’s a good practice because humility is such a vital component of faith. It’s hard to know just how amazing God’s salvation is if we have no idea how much we need it.

Even so, I wonder if Lent is also about learning to make space in our lives for the surprising, even shocking, power of God. Continually, God’s power defies what we assume to be reasonable and feasible. Repeatedly, God challenges us to adjust our notions of what even the laws of physics, biology, and reason dictate. Over and over again, God pushes us to be a people who live in such a way that, well, might make others laugh.

A couple in their nineties chosen to be the ancestors of a radically new holy community created and sustained by God.

An unlikely peasant couple, becoming the parents of God’s own son, Jesus.

A Messiah, born in poverty, accompanied by a rag tag bunch of misfits, turning the world upside down with a radical new message of love, acceptance, healing, mercy, and unimagined possibility.

A Savior who forces open the door of salvation not by way of sword, fear, and ‘shock and awe’ power, like we tend to be so hung up on, but by his own suffering and death on a cross.

None of it makes much sense according to human standards. We, like Abraham, could just as easily fall on our faces with laughter, thinking

that this is one heck of a crazy plan God has.

Yet, God Almighty doesn't do much laughing. El Shaddai continually proves the truth of Angel Gabriel's word to Mary, 'With God nothing is impossible...'

It's a tall order – even greater, I think, than simply confessing our short-comings. It requires a complete make-over of how we will live and by what rules we will shape our lives.

Almost every major social movement that has occurred in history has involved the church in some way because, while the world might laugh at the possibility of such proposed changes, the church has lived long enough with this God to know that when God makes promises it's time to buckle up because we're in for one heck of a ride!

One cannot read the Gospels without tripping over the impossible, even the ludicrous at every turn. Yet, faith means, as it did for Abraham, making space in our lives for the surprising power of God. Faith means making space in our lives to believe that, yes, even you and I, even small churches like ours, even places like this that seem so inconsequential in the grand scheme of things and whose very existence seems to constantly hang in the balance, even we can, in the company of God, be the ancestors of great things, the makers of great nations, the source of great leaders and of new and holy possibilities. Even we, who have trouble forgiving ourselves, who can come up with a long and convincing list of reasons why we'll never measure up, can be, by the power of God almighty, the Beloved community, God's blessed and empowered agents of redeeming change. Young, old, and everyone in between - we are the Abrahams and the Sarahs, the ones being challenged to set disbelief aside and believe in the God who breaks the rules of not only physics and biology but of long entrenched social norms.

It's something important to consider in this day and age when this land we call home has become more of a cage of fear than an open expanse of grace filled dreams of possibility.

Our nation has the largest defense budget in the world while, at the same time, we continue to reduce the resources to those arms of our government that specialize in diplomacy.

We incarcerate more people than any other nation and we do little to rehabilitate them and provide them a second chance so that, when they're released, they have fighting chance to make it.

More than ever, we seem prone to drawing up bridges, so we can surround ourselves with like-minded people rather than being builders of bridges that force us to sit with the different Other, in an effort to make them a friend.

We talk a lot about the dangers of mental illness, particularly after every shooting massacre that hits our news feed, yet we continually gut the resources of counseling and psychiatric agencies whose expertise and services are so desperately needed. Many of these places are overwhelmed with need for their services yet they and those employed by them struggle to survive. Equally true is the fact that those who tend to need these services the most are the ones least able to afford them.

People often come to me seeking this kind of help and, I must tell you, it is difficult to find places to refer them to.

As we weep with parents whose loss of beloved children staggers us, we are reminded again that there is nothing more precious to us than our children. Yet Daycare workers, with College degrees, charged with the nearly sacred responsibility of caring for our children, often find themselves in situations where they are barely making minimum wage.

To some, changing such things might seem akin to breaking the laws of physics but we know better. We are the church, the disciples of the living Christ, called and challenged to make space in our lives for the surprising power of God. We are the church, called and sent to do the impossible. We are the church, the ones who know well that when God makes a promise, it's time to buckle up.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Holy and gracious God, we come to this time of prayer knowing that there is power in your grace. Power enough to surprise even the most faithful. Power enough to overturn even the most basic assumptions our world has resigned itself to. Power enough to transform even that which we have deemed untransformable. Power enough to make even us agents of your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Gracious God, as we make this Lenten journey, create within us a space big enough to believe in the unbelievable, to be surprised by the unconventional, to be engaged in the amazing call you make to each of us to do the seemingly ridiculous.

We pray this knowing that our world, your wounded creation, is in such great need of transforming. We have for too long allowed the sinfully entrenched to rule our days. We have for too long allowed fear to be our Master. We have for too long drawn lines to separate neighbor from neighbor, enemy from friend, and outsider from insider. Enliven us, O God. Make dreamers of us, O Holy One. Stir the embers of our faith into courageous and bold belief, El Shaddai.

We pray this day, O Lord, for those who weep because of the deep wounds that have been afflicted upon them. We pray for the discouraged who cannot fathom a way out of their dead-ends. We pray for those who are physically or mentally incarcerated in prisons of their making and/or prisons made by others. We pray for the ill, the broken, the weeping, and the sorrowful. We ask, O Lord, for you to promise us again that things can change, that things will be forced to bend towards your ways of justice, that our cries will be heard and responded to. Bring us peace, O God. Bring us hope, O God. Bring us purpose, O God. Bring us determination, O God. We pray this

even as we now hold before you these prayers that we name in our silence and aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.