

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday in Lent
1 March 2015

Scripture readings:

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

I must confess that in reading the Genesis lesson today I thought of my dear 99-year-old Aunt Gertrude. She, as you know, is very, very blessed with great health, sight, audition, memory, beauty, vanity. She is the most capable 99-year-old I know. But I would love to hear her response if somebody came to her and said, "*How would you like to be pregnant now?*" [laughter]

The second Sunday in Lent, there's an awful lot of laughter. It's a joke! It's an absolute joke by any standard of rationality: by the standards of science, by the standards of society, by the standards of you-name-it. And guess what? Their identities changed. Abraham and Sarah, they got new names. She had a child, a boy-child whose name is *they who laugh - Yitzchaq*. Maybe we should change this into Laughter Sunday, second Sunday in Lent.

The pope, as you know, did not read the same lessons that we did today. We knew this was coming. It hasn't ruined our relationship, however. The transfiguration lesson that we read the last Sunday before Lent is read in Roman churches on the second Sunday in Lent, and my buddy did a really lovely job of talking about how the transfiguration embodied the promise of following God. And God's promise is that we should end up happy no matter what goes on along the road.

You remember my illustration of the yard man who stopped a couple weeks ago to dig me out of the snow? My car slid off the driveway into a snow bank. I tried to dig it out. All efforts failed. People drove by. Maybe it was you who beeped and waved. [laughter] Finally, after the sun started to set and I'm out there saying words I wouldn't say in preaching. The man who cuts our lawn drove by, stopped and turned around and came back with a bucket of gravel from his car and a shovel. Bruce is a piece of the local furniture here - easygoing, simple piece of gorgeous humanity with his plumber's crack in the air and his shovel flying a mile a minute and his grit underneath the tires. I'm in the car - get this - he's giving me directions which way to turn and digs me out. I said to him, "*Bruce, I'm losing my religion over this.*" Now this man whose wife spends half a year in the mental hospital said to me, "*Life has its difficulties but it's good!*"

Now the joke is that that kind of Gospel could get to me from such an unexpected source. Bruce isn't ordained. He's not a rabbi, a priest, a deacon, all those high elevated churchly people we always pray for. I don't even know whether or not he goes to church and I really don't care. What I care about is that he was used to communicate hope and love and possibility to me in the midst of my extremity and I see that, frankly, as nothing less than absolute divine - a message from God through another human being.

And so it is that we have this example today in Genesis of Abram and Sarai who become Abraham and Sarah, who allow their identities to be changed by a ridiculous Almighty God who says to them, "*I wish to use you for the future improvement of the world.*" And they laughed.

There are parallels here, of course, with the annunciation to Mary. The angel comes and says... She's not 99. She's 12. All right, maybe 14. It's just as ridiculous that she should bear the Son of God as it is that Abraham and Sarah should become the father and mother of nations. Absolutely ridiculous!

Ridiculous that my help should come from the gardener in the middle of the winter who, instead of a mower, had a shovel and instead of supporting me in my perverted perspective which was all about me - my situation, my predicament, my difficulty - he reminded me from the midst of his own... his rather ill wife was in the car at that time...He reminded me that I lacked perspective in the most beautiful, humble and impressive way.

I suppose if Lent is about anything it's about taking forty days to correct our perspective, however you care to do that. And I don't think that has much to do with eating meat. I really don't. But it has to do with doing what Abraham and Sarah do and that is this: they say, as Mary said in the annunciation, "Yes" to God's ridiculousness. Yes! The story from Genesis is not so much about God's ability to perform miracles and use 99-year-old women to have babies. The story from Genesis is about people of any age - 12, 14 or 99 - to allow God to use them for God's purposes which often, if not always, looks crazy, dumb and absolutely ridiculous to most of the rest of the world.

The pope was very concerned about the persecution of Christians in Syria and Iraq this morning and, if I know this pope at all, he's concerned about the persecution of people anywhere, and he's concerned about freedom and liberty and justice and righteousness and holiness. I felt united with him in that I know this pope who I think knows something about Jesus and Mary and maybe Gandhi and maybe Martin Luther King, Jr. He knows that the answer to that is not by killing more people but by taking an absolutely ridiculous posture in this insane world of ours about and toward and for peace. Maybe that's one to put in your pipe and smoke for forty days in Lent. How is it we as a nation can pursue peace in the crazy world we live in - here, now. Can it be that we have forty days in Lent to believe that God continues to come to us with extraordinary and ridiculous propositions and asks us to believe them and allow God to work them in, with, through and by us in this world here and now just as that happened for Abram and Sarai, just as it happened for Mary.

Do you know that in our lifetimes Gandhi's approach to peace evicted the entire British army from India without one weapon. Now you want to talk about changing identity - giving a new name to the Raj! *It is* and we know that it's possible. The challenge is: can we believe it? And then can we trust God enough to use us to approach that goal? Or whichever one it is God provides for you. And whatever that may be I'm sure you will think at first, along with me and the rest of us, it's ridiculous!

I have hope, friends, because in the middle of this miserable weather we have bothered to take inconvenient time to consider that God speaks to us and to the entire community of faith throughout history with a ridiculous message of hope, possibility, peace, love and improvement for us here and now which we believe, teach and confess can never happen for us unless it happens for all.

I chuckled in a phone call to a college classmate of mine with whom I've only recently come to renew an acquaintance who announced at our first meeting after probably forty or fifty some years that he has stage four bone cancer. He is himself a pastor and was going on about a political figure whom he believes is beyond redemption. He referred to him as something that needs to be wiped off the bottom of one's shoes. We all know politicians like that, don't we? Don't bother to look for the politician. Use a mirror! We are often invited into this religious posture that we're somehow better than others and that Christ died for them but didn't need to for me, that I do pretty well so he wouldn't have had to die. He might have just to have gone hungry for a night and not eaten meat and that would have done it for me.

Lent is also a time for us to take serious stock of the deadliness of our own sinfulness and the cost of that to the Savior. And so it is that Jesus dies for the whole shooting match and does so because he's loving those who are driving nails through his hands and loving those who used the instruments of the Passion to beat him and place a crown of thorns on his head and spit in his face and smite him and mock him in a purple robe and provide all manner of torture and terror and denigration in his direction. And it is precisely, friends, for those he came to bring a message of God's love and salvation and hope.

And you know my feeling probably: there is not one of us here who is any better than any of those. Consequently my highly developed theory about Judas: Judas did absolutely nothing other than the other twelve. He betrayed the Lord just as they did. We think it's worse because he did it for thirty pieces of silver. Whoopee! The Judas story is important because he never got to the point of believing that he couldn't work his salvation. When he thought his salvation depended upon himself he was more honest than the rest of the twelve because he knew he

couldn't do it so he did himself in.

Now I'm not suggesting we go do ourselves in, but I am suggesting that we believe along with Judas that we cannot work our own salvation. And here's where the joy of the gospel comes in. *God can and does!* And has done that long before we ever get around to holding up the mirror to our own sinful selves and say, *"I need it."* It's there - complete, full, and all the Lutherans in the room will agree with me, won't you? Now if we can work on the Methodists to get that we will have made some progress! *[laughter]*

But that's the joy of the Gospel, that God precedes our need with all that is required, provides it in full and complete measure for us and for all who want it. It has nothing to do with our good works or our deserts or our earning our forgiveness. It is, in fact an issue of Grace and Grace alone. God in the beginning creates the world and all who are in it and looks at what he creates and loves his creation. And she says, *"It is good!"* And the desire for us to understand goodness is to believe the promise that the intention is for us in this world to be happy, as impossible as that may be or seem.

And so it is Mary, Sarah, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. who say to the world, *"I know you think this is nuts, but I believe this is possible. And because I am so fully and completely loved by God I can say to you, my worst enemy, so are you."* And that will do what happened in the Genesis text today. That will change our identity as well as the identity of the person who is loved. And even if it's only the matter of changing a letter or a pronunciation here and there, it will be a world of difference. We will become different people and we will be believers in the extraordinary Good News of God's love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.