

Last week, if you were in church, you might remember that we began a series on one of the great characters of the Old Testament, Abraham. We'll be picking up on his story as it comes up in our set of readings over the next five or six weeks. We heard last week his story begins with God calling Abraham to a promised land, and he had to head off to a place where he didn't know where he was going. The call was accompanied by a promise that he would be the father of many nations, which came as something of a surprise to him because he was an old man, and at that stage had no children with his wife, Sarah. Yet, he went, followed the call, claimed the promise that he would be the father of many nations, that Sarah would indeed bear him a child.

As we look at the story of Abraham, we'll realize that even this great hero of the faith was not without flaws. It would appear today that he had something of an issue with communication, because he'd actually forgotten to tell his wife Sarah that he'd got this great promise from God and that she was to bear a child in her old age. As a husband myself, let me just say a word of defense here with Abraham that these things happen. Life gets very busy, and we forget to pass on some of the details that we hear.

So, it was that when these three mysterious visitors come to visit Abraham and are talking with him, and one of them says, "I will surely return to you in due season and your wife Sarah shall have a son," this came as a surprise to Sarah who was listening at the door of the tent. She responds by laughing to herself, "After I have grown old, shall I have this pleasure?" she said, but maybe she wasn't just laughing to herself because she was overheard.

Then we get this rather farcical dialogue in the text. The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a son now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Which in the more accurate, older translation is more like, is anything too difficult for the Lord? But Sarah denies laughing. "I didn't laugh," she said. "Oh, yes, you did," the Lord said. Of course, she laughed. She laughed because of the absurd

disproportion between the divine promise and the human possibility. Sarah's response, her laughing, was entirely understandable and human.

Some of you may remember that last year I had cause in one of my sermons to mention a phrase that I think can be dropped in anywhere to the Old Testament, to the Hebrew scriptures, that phrase being, "and also much cattle". Well, I think I've discovered this week another phrase that can be dropped in many places in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. That phrase, it's a bit more colloquial and it only works with trendy, modern translations of the Bible, but the phrase is, "you must be joking".

For example, it fits perfectly here. Now, Abraham and Sarah were old advanced in age. It had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women, so Sarah laughed at herself saying, "You must be joking." Fits well in the previous chapter. When God first addresses Abraham and says, "As for Sarah, your wife, I will bless her and give you a son by her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "You must be joking."

I'll give another example from the New Testament this time. After Jesus has been raised from the dead, he appears to two disciples who were walking away from Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus. He talked with them, and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread, and he disappeared from them, but they rushed back to Jerusalem to find the other disciples. They knocked on the door where the disciples were staying and said, "The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon." "You must be joking," said the disciple who opened the door.

I could go on. There are many examples. Find your some for yourself this afternoon where that phrase can be inserted in the text. It seems to be that the phrase "you must be joking" could be inserted just at the cusp of faith. Wherever you insert it, that's the challenge, the point of challenge. It reveals the limit of faith.

For example, let me address the Padres fans in the congregation this morning. I'll begin by asking a simple question. Do you think the second half of the season is going to be better than the first? Well, we'd all say, I think, "I certainly hope so." What if I said, "Well, the Padres are going to win the World Series this year?" Are you still with me? What about if I said they're going to win this year, next year, and then establish a dynasty? Some of you might be thinking, "you must be joking".

We all move at different paces. We all struggle with different things. Faith is different for all of us. Abraham was known as a great man of faith. When God said to him, "Leave your home," he did. He went. He responded to that call of God in faith, and not all of us might have been able to do that. We have different levels of faith, different things we struggle with. Let's think of the story of our lives. I invite you to think at the point at which you'd say, "you must be joking".

If I said to you, "Well, your name is whatever, and you are a human being," I'm sure you'd agree. If I said, "You are 28 years old," and you were lucky enough to be 28 years old, you'd say, "Well, you're correct." What about if I said, "You are created by God. You're a unique and special creation. All your sins are forgiven. God loves you very much." Have you said it yet?

Let's look at the epistle set for today from the book of Romans. St. Paul lists these great truths. We have peace with God. God's love has been poured into our hearts. God proves his love for us that whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Are you still comfortable with that? Do you think I'm joking?

We are a people of faith. Even though that faith might look slightly different with all of us, we have faith because we believe in a God for whom nothing is impossible, for whom nothing is too difficult. Let's each of us pray that we are given the gift of faith, that we're able to nurture and develop that faith that has been granted to us, that each of us might grow in the faith that has been placed within us. Amen.