

Story and Meditation: Take Root and Grow

June 14, 2020

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)

by *Eric Anderson*

The lodgepole pine doesn't grow in Hawai'i – at least, if anybody has planted them here, I don't know about it and, well, it seems like it would be a bad idea.

There was a seed cone on the side of a lodgepole pine, its branch waving in the breeze on a slope of the Rocky Mountains. The seeds within were pretty uncomfortable – if they'd had stomachs, they'd probably have felt sea-sick as they rose and fell – but also a little excited. They could tell that the time for falling free of the mother tree was at hand.

They were also confused and afraid. Each seed in the cone was encased in a hard substance. They didn't see any way to get it open. Perhaps, they hoped, it would open when the cone fell to the ground. But what if it didn't?

Some of them called to the tree, "What do we do? What do we do to grow?"

Suddenly the wind gusted again and the cone sailed free. "Just wait!" said the tree as they whirled away. "I promise you will grow!"

Now the cone went bouncing down the slope, smacking rocks and bushes and the trunks of other trees. It wasn't long, however, before it was still, nestled in a hollow in the soil.

"All right, everybody!" cried one of the seeds. "Now!"

And... nothing happened. Sure enough, those cases surrounding each seed were unbreakable, at least, they couldn't break them from within. The fall, with all its bounces, hadn't made a crack or a dent.

They didn't know what to do.

They didn't know what to do when they heard rain fall. Here was water! Would that be what it took to grow? But no. Nor did warm days. Or cold nights. Or animals picking at the cone. Nothing made a difference.

Yet the tree had said, "I promise you will grow."

One morning the seeds realized that something new had come. The birds, animals, and even insects of the forest were running by, all in one direction. The air smelled of smoke, and then

grew thicker and thicker until you could hardly see the tree next to you. It grew hot, until amidst the haze there were bright red and orange and yellow flames.

“That’s it,” thought the seeds. “We’ll all be burned up in the fire.”

Yet the tree had said, some of them remembered, “I promise you will grow.”

What followed was intense. It was smoky. It was hot. The grasses and bushes growing around the cone burst into flame. The cone sat in a bowl of fire.

But strangely, the heat did not overwhelm the seeds. Even more strangely, the case of the cone softened. As it did, gaps opened. The seeds found themselves suddenly free. With the upper leaves burned away, they had plenty of sun. Once the fire had passed and the winter rains came, they had plenty of water.

In short, they grew.

In their turn, as trees, they watched cones tumble down the mountainside and called to them the precious words: “I promise you will grow.”

As far as Abraham and Sarah were concerned, the promise of God had been too long coming. The problem was that they were childless as a couple. God had promised to make them into ancestors, and their descendants into a nation. Genesis first tells of that promise in chapter 12. It’s repeated in chapter 15. In chapter 16, Sarah and Abraham coerced Hagar, Sarah’s slave, into having Abraham’s son Ishmael. In chapter 17, God makes it clear that the promise of children is not just to Abraham but to Sarah as well (Abraham laughed at that). That brings us to this encounter with these strange visitors in chapter 18. Our narrator tells us right at the start that these are a manifestation of God. It’s not so clear whether Abraham and Sarah knew that. Abraham seems to believe that these guests are great and important at least, but whatever Sarah knows or thinks of them gets startled away when they provoke her first to laugh – at the idea that she would have a child at the age of 90 – and then to lie, when they take her to task for laughing.

Now that I think of it, laughing at the things God says and then lying about it are not, shall we say, unusual behaviors for human beings, now are they?

Like the lodgepole pine seed, however, the promise, though made long ago, is a true and faithful promise of a true and faithful God. It had been twenty-five years since Abraham first left his family’s lands in Haran. Twenty-five years to wait. And the promise arrived in... laughter.

Laughter can be hard to come by. America keeps reminding us that its racist past is not in the past but raw and dreadful and deadly in the present. I’m perfectly ready to stop talking about a coronavirus pandemic, but it not only hasn’t ended, it hasn’t actually declined on a national

scale. People talk about a second peak – I’m among them – but truthfully, we’ve done no better than a plateau.

Lucky we live Hawai’i in deep, deep truth.

Asylum seekers continue to be incarcerated: entire families behind barbed wire and threatened with guns for the offense of filing an asylum claim in the US. Those who ordered the assault on demonstrators in Lafayette Square Park in Washington, DC, whose violence drove clergy and staff members from the grounds of St. John’s Church, have made no apology. Nobody has been held accountable. In all too many places, we know that men are abusing women in their homes.

Well. You know the list. I’m sure you can add to it.

We may well laugh for similar reasons to Sarah’s first laugh: “Promise all you want, God. I know better. These are the things we suffer and, if we’re lucky, endure.”

But listen to Amanda Benckhuysen who writes at Working Preacher: “God had rocked [Sarah’s] world, defying the laws of nature, upending everything she knew to be true. This was no small thing. That it took Sarah some time to process and even test what she had heard reflects a normal human reaction to the marvelous deeds of God. For just as Sarah laughs, we also laugh. We laugh with incredulity every time a child is born healthy. We laugh when someone battles and survives cancer. We laugh when an infertile couple announces they are pregnant. We laugh when crocuses poke up through the lawn. We laugh when we see movement toward reconciliation between two people that have a long history of hurt and hatred. We laugh whenever we see moments of redemption and healing that we know taste of such goodness and sweetness, they can only come from the hand of God. And in those moments, we might puzzle and wonder and question and doubt. Can such a thing really be? The answer in these moments is ‘yes.’ For there is nothing too wonderful for God.”

I note with some dismay that, as far as I know, God has made no promises to bring an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. God has, however, promised to be the great healer of the human race. As far as I know, God has made no promises to end American racism (or anybody else’s racism). God has, however, promised to bring justice to human communities. There are many things that God has not promised to do or to undo.

What God has promised is to love us, to be with us, and to receive us when the stresses of life have become too great.

If you’ve ever wondered how Abraham and Sarah held on to God and to God’s promises for a quarter of a century, that’s how. While they waited for the promise of another generation, they knew day-in, day-out, week-in, week-out, a promise of God fulfilled. “I will bless you,” said God in chapter 12 as Abraham left home. “I am your shield,” said God in chapter 15, as Abraham wondered about his legacy. “I will be God to you,” said God in chapter 17.

For twenty-five years they knew that God was with them, that God cared for them, that God blessed them. Knowing a promise fulfilled, they waited for another promise to take root and grow.

God is with you as much as with Abraham and Sarah. Live in a promise fulfilled as you await promises to take root and grow.

Amen.