

Sept 15

I guess if we want to boil today's reading down to a one-liner, it could be this: when God makes a promise, God will deliver on that promise. And it doesn't matter whether we believe that promise or not – Abraham and Sarah really didn't.

Here Sarah laughs at the promise she will even have the pleasure of sex, let alone a child. In chapter 17, Abraham laughed skeptically too.

It also doesn't matter whether or not the promise is physically actually even possible. Here, it isn't. Post-menopausal women don't become pregnant. And even before menopause Sarah had been infertile.

But then the dead don't come back to life either, so there's that. Another one-liner is there in the readings – nothing is impossible for God.

Another one-liner could be that God brings life out of death. Sarah's hopes and dreams for a child were dead. God's promise of a child seems laughable. But as she listened to these mysterious visitors, one can sort of imagine her, still wondering, could it really happen? And maybe she felt just the slightest stirring of hope...and joy.

What all of these one liners have in common...is that they bring joy...and even laughter.

Isaac's birth brings real laughter and joy to Sarah. But by that time, a whole lot of life has happened...and the disappointment of their childlessness ran through all of it.

Last week we read the very beginning of Sarah and Abraham's story. God told them to pack up and hit the road to an amazing new future...a future in a new land and a future with many descendants. God promised they would be blessed so that through them, the whole world would be blessed.

Twenty five or so years later, none of that has happened. But it had been a heckuva ride.

After their first glimpse of the Promised Land, they traveled to Egypt. There, even though Sarah was getting on in years, she was still so beautiful Abraham was worried Pharaoh would kill him and steal Sarah. So they told Pharaoh she was Abraham's sister. Pharaoh promptly made her a part of his harem. When Pharaoh caught them in this lie, he kicked them out of Egypt.

Not on the typical travel agenda.

After Abraham and his nephew Lot when their separate ways, Lot got captured during a war. Abraham took 318 of his men on a successful rescue mission.

God repeats the promise to Abraham in a weird vision involving a smoking pot and flaming torch, but still no child was conceived.

Weary of waiting for God to come through, Sarah concocts a plan to have Abraham get her servant, Hagar, pregnant. A child is born to Hagar and named Ishmael. But they soon learn that's not how God meant for this to go. Sarah would still be the one to have the promised child.

Ishmael too would receive a blessing and a promise. In the rite of circumcision, Ishmael too became a part of God's covenant...but he was not the promised son.

However, God wasn't done yet

Three messengers...who might be angels...or who might actually be God...make their appearance, and God's promise is offered once again. Only now there is a timeline. Within the year elderly Sarah will become pregnant by her elderly husband...nothing is impossible for God.

After a little side trip in the story to tell about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, finally Isaac is born.

Now there is joy...and there's laughter. God kept God's promise.

It sort of seems like a lovely feel-good Hallmark movie ending.

But what does it say to us...especially people who are still heavy into the disappointment aspect of our story.

Infertility brings sorrow and disappointment month after month to some couples. This story isn't a guarantee that a long hoped for pregnancy will happen.

Maybe we've lost a job or been passed over for promotion after promotion. This story is not a guarantee that our work life will always be wonderful.

It also doesn't guarantee we won't get our hearts broken when a romance ends badly or a marriage crumbles or a friendship comes to an end.

We can keep striving for our dreams. We can do what we can to make them come true. We can trust that God is with us, and shares our disappointments and our successes. But faith is never a guarantee that things will go the way we want them to.

This story should never bring us to tell someone who hopes year after year for some dream to come true that they just need more faith.

The story on a grand theological scale tells us, again, that God is moving creation to a grand future...a future of healing and wholeness and peace and love. That promise is sure. When God promises that the whole world will be blessed through Abraham and Sarah, we can trust that.

In fact, in Jesus Christ, the promise of new life...of new creation...has already begun to unfold for us.

But on the smaller scale of our lives, we have to trust that promise, all the while understanding that it likely won't happen the way we thought.

On that smaller scale, I believe the story has another kind of promise for us.

A promise of joy. Isaac's birth doesn't bring the end of struggle for Abraham and Sarah. Sarah does not deal well Abraham's first son, Ishmael and his mother Hagar. The whole troubling near sacrifice of Isaac looms. Sarah dies.

But on the day of Isaac's birth, there was joy.

God's promise from the very beginning is a promise of life...of new life. And with new life comes joy. New life on the grand scale of resurrection...and new life on a smaller scale in the everyday stuff of life.

New life comes to us every day in some form or another. When we're in the midst of the sadness or disappointment of shattered dreams, it can be easy to miss. And when we miss it, we miss the abundant opportunities for joy.

Sometimes, joy comes in the form of a good deep laugh over something silly...

Sometimes it's a new puppy or kitten or calf. Sometimes it's the joy of moving your body on a bicycle or along the sidewalk or in a swimming pool or playing football or softball.

Sometimes it's the joy of making music

Sometimes it's the deep joy from hearing the news that you got a job, or the CT scan was clear or your grown children make good lives and good marriages.

Sometimes it's sitting on the patio on a beautiful evening with someone you love or hiking through beautiful forests, prairies or mountain vistas.

God is faithful. We can trust the promise that God is moving us every day to a new future filled with joy and meaning. What we can't do is put our own requirements on what that looks like. God doesn't promise to do everything we want on the timeline we want.

But I think God does promise us joy along the way. God calls us into community, to share life with other people, and with animals and the rest of creation. Sometimes that drives us crazy. Sometimes it seems like too much responsibility.

But it also is where we find our deepest joy and connection.

So where have you found joy lately? Just throw some things out

God has launched us on an amazing adventure called life. God has promised to walk with us and to draw us continually towards ever more life.

God has not promised the absence of hard times...in fact the opposite is true. But sometimes, the real gift is being able to notice those little gifts of joy, even when things are at their hardest.

We too, join Sarah at the tent door. We listen to God's promise, and feel just the slightest stirring of joy...and hope. And we laugh with joy...not because we don't believe it, but because, somehow, we realize we do.