

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5th Sunday of Easter
Year A

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May 11, 2017

Text: Genesis 17:1-7; 15-27

Title: “Emerge: Open—Into the Light”

In 1865 an editorial appeared in the Boston Post. It said: “Well-informed people know it is impossible to transmit the voice over wires and that were it possible to do so, the thing would be of no practical value.”

Eleven years later, on Sunday, June 25, 1876, the same day the Battle of the Little Big Horn took place—also known as Custer’s Last Stand, Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated his new invention. Later he wrote to his father:

"The day is coming when telegraph wires will be laid on to houses just like water or gas -- and friends will converse with each other without leaving home."

The world was marveling at the advancement of technology in that period of our nation’s history: the telegraph, the radio, phonograph, stock-ticker. Still, an Oxford professor, Erasmus Wilson said of the light bulb: “[W]hen the Paris Exhibition closes, electric light will close with it and no more will be heard of it.” The next year Thomas Edison invented the first commercially viable electric bulb.

As technology continued evolving, in 1907 inventors were lurching forward on the development of the radio, W.W. Dean, president of the Dean Telephone Company said to Lee DeForest, who was a pioneer in the development of the radio, “You could put in this room, DeForest, all the radiotelephone apparatus that the country will ever need.” Nineteen years later, Mr. DeForest, the then-celebrated radio pioneer, was quoted in the New York Times as another technological advancement drew near. It was called television. The radio pioneer was quoted saying: “While theoretically and technically television may be feasible, commercially and financially I consider it an impossibility, a development of which we need waste little time dreaming.”

And finally in 1951 the New York Daily News commented on the talent of a young Willie Mays. They said of him: “[J]ust so-so in center field.” (Information found in *Lighten Up*, March 1999, p. 3)

We human beings can be so very skeptical about what is possible. And it's not just about technological advancements. Listen to the story of Abram as God provides a vision of the future:

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" 19 God said, "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. 20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. 21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." 22 And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

23 Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. 24 Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 25 And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 26 That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; 27 and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

So when Abram hears God say that his wife will give birth in nine months--long after she had passed through menopause--who finds it strange that Abram would fall on his face laughing with skepticism? They had long ago passed through the prime years for parenting when energy is high. (A friend and colleague of mine used to say after he'd been watching his grandchildren

with his wife, “There is a reason God made parents young.”) Retirement and pension checks had become a way of life now. Once they’d been given a promise that their descendants would be like the stars. But now, they’re well beyond the years when baby-making activity had been a regular and critical part of their relationship. This was like raising Lazarus after he’d been dead three days, like some men flying to the moon and driving a motorized vehicle around and talking to people on earth nearly a quarter of a million miles away. It was an impossibility. Abram and Sarai had given up on that dream long ago, had settled for the life they’d been given.

Did you hear about the teenager who was pulled over for speeding? The officer got out of his car, walked up to the kid’s car. The young man rolled down his window. Officer said, “Young man, I’ve been waiting for you all day.” The teen replied, “Yeah, well, I got here as fast as I could.” When the officer stopped laughing he sent him away without a ticket. (Lighten Up, Late Summer 1999, p.4)

Abram was no longer the young, driven man, leaving home and speeding into the future God had promised him. Now afternoon naps in the heat of the day occupied Abram’s time. Life appeared to be winding down for him and his wife, Sarai. But now this crazy appearance of God with this absurd announcement, not unlike that given to Elizabeth about John the Baptist’s birth or to Mary about Jesus birth centuries later, except they would be younger women. Sarai, who had longed for a child of her own for decades, must have been well past menopause for Abram to have laughed. Otherwise he might have cried or been angry when the news was broken.

One of my favorite seminary professors was nearing retirement when I was a student there. Paul shared one day in class that as he and his wife were making retirement plans, they learned that she was pregnant. Paul said he was distraught by the news. This was no laughing matter. It was not what they’d planned nor wanted. They were looking forward to time to be together, just the two of them, time to travel and work on their bucket list. He was so upset by this he even thought about abortion. But, they couldn’t and didn’t. And now, he said, he was so grateful for their son who at that time was 18 years old. “He changed our lives,” Paul said, “and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

God has a way of changing the future with present promises. For Abram and Sarai, this promise begins with the Lord appearing to Abram who doesn’t become Abraham until God changes his name. This is “El Shaddai” visiting Abram. It’s a name for God that goes back to the very beginning when “God—or in Hebrew, ‘Elohim’—created the heavens and the earth.” El Shaddai comes from that Hebrew name for God, Elohim, and is simply shortened to El.

Shaddai, on the other hand, is less clear. The traditional translation has been “Almighty” but there are also other possibilities. It could come from the ancient term “shadu” which means “mountain”, so the translation would be “God of the mountains”. It could also be related to the Hebrew word “shad”, which is used in scripture for a woman’s breast, which, of course, is the place a newborn child receives nourishment and life. As one scholar wrote: “...it perhaps conveys God’s tender and nurturing nature, the way a mother cares for her child.” (Homiletics)

So El Shaddai comes to Abram and makes him a promise that from Abram will arise a family that will evolve into many nations. So committed is God to this promise that God changes Abram’s name. Abram means "exalted father," but Abraham means "father of a

multitude." And because the promise could not come to fulfillment without Sarai, God changes her name too. She would become Sarah. Such a promise seems incredibly unlikely and Abram—now Abraham—falls to the ground laughing, not laughing at God but laughing at the absurdity of an old man and woman becoming parents. IN the next chapter of Genesis, chapter 18, Sarah would join her husband in that laughter. The way I hear it is a light-hearted reaction of disbelief.

Can you identify with Abraham and Sarah? I suspect we laugh at God's visions for us all the time. We don't think it's possible. If someone had told me 40 years ago I'd be an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, I would have been laughing along with Abraham. That's not what I saw in my future. Would you have thought it possible that apartheid in South Africa would be abolished without a blood bath? Of those here this morning who were alive 75 years ago, how many would have thought one day human beings would fly to the moon and play golf? Or that a southern black preacher would proclaim the gospel and use non-violence so powerfully that schools, stores, public restrooms, restaurants and public transportation would be desegregated in the south?

Of those of us who were alive 45 years ago, how many would have even considered the possibility that the Berlin Wall would be torn down, the Soviet Union dissolved and that some of the former Soviet countries would now be members of NATO?

Who would have predicted 40 years ago how rapidly the computer would invade our daily lives with more and more people having one and even two or more personal computers in each home? Would John Wesley have foreseen the denomination he was responsible for creating establishing a university on the continent of Africa that would provide educations for thousands? Would the small group that established this congregation in the late 19th century have conceived of later generations of worshippers sending missionaries to Haiti, Mexico, Ohio, Nigeria, Illinois, Mt. Pleasant, Fairgrove, Essexville, Tawas, Chelsea or downtown Saginaw? People from this congregation have served with the love of Christ in their hearts in all those places and more. Would they have imagined this congregation would one day help build a church in Brazil?

There is--in so many people--a deep skepticism about the possibilities for the future. We can't see it, can't believe it until we're dragged into the future with the visions of the dreamers carrying us there, sometimes against our will. The dreamers characterize Yogi Berra's remark, of whom in 1942 the Cardinals General Manager, Branch Ricky said, "He'll never make anything more than a Triple A ballplayer at best." It was this eventual Hall of Famer who said: "If I hadn't believed it, I wouldn't have seen it." He also said, "The future ain't what it used to be."

With El Shaddai the future ain't what it used to be. El Shaddai is not only the promise maker but the promise keeper. Isn't it interesting to note that three of the world's great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity & Islam—all trace their origins to Abraham, who once was promised that El Shaddai would make of him and his wife Sarah a multitude of nations. This promise required new names and the willingness of Abraham and Sarah to begin a new family, a new mission. God called them to be open to the possibilities of new life, calling them to emerge out of the laughter of disbelief into the joy of trusting the power of God to make all things new.

So this all begs the question, where is El Shaddai calling us? Sometimes God calls us into a future we didn't expect and we laugh at the impossibility of it all, but our laughter does not keep God from promising or calling. What is God calling us to be and do in this time and place?

Last Sunday, I shared the possibility of establishing a coffee shop church in Auburn where youth, in particular, would have a safe place to gather, a place to come and build relationships, a place where the message of God's love and care in Jesus Christ would be shared by music playing in the background, books available that share that same message, group studies, Bible studies, informal worship, a different kind of church. A place where youth might be comfortable finding help when they're struggling with life issues, maybe addictions. I don't know where this vision might go, but knowing El Shaddai, I'm not ready to laugh it off as impossible.

What is God calling us to be and do in this time and place? What journey is God calling you personally to in this place and time? We need people who laugh at the promises of God, but who nonetheless are willing to walk with God to that future which "...ain't what it used to be." We are not called to be a static church but one alive with new-birth possibilities.

Sarah eventually had that promised son. They called him "Isaac", which means in Hebrew "he laughs". Seems appropriate for a child at whose possible birth announcement his parents laughed. And though both Abraham and Sarah here are not models of faith but of disbelief, above the laughter, the scripture proclaims loudly and clearly that God sees farther than we do, our impossibilities are God's realities. The Lord invites all who hear to remember that when we are confronted by what seems impossible or ridiculous or when there seems no way out. God is with us even in our skeptical laughter. God continues to call us to a well-lit future we can hardly imagine.