

### Never Too Old

Back in ancient, biblical times, names were important. They said something about a person. For example, the name Isaac means “he laughs.” Pretty appropriate for a child whose birth was so improbable and delightful, wouldn’t you say?

The name Abraham means “father of a multitude.” Which Abraham ended up being. His original name, Abram, meant “Father be praised,” referring here to God, our heavenly father and mother. Which makes this a good time to say “Happy Father’s Day!”

Sarah was originally named Sarai. Which means “quarrelsome.” (How would you like to have a name like that?) But along the way, God changed her name to Sarah. Guess what that means? It means “princess.” Which makes me wonder, what did God see in Sarai that others, including her parents, didn’t?

Speaking of God, even God has a personal name in the Bible. Do you remember what that is? Yahweh. In our NRSV pew bibles, every time the word LORD appears, and it is all in caps, that is an editorial, respectful substitution for what in the original texts was God’s personal name, Yahweh. Which emphasizes and reminds us that our God is a personal God, who is close to us, and cares for us. The name Yahweh, by the way, means “I am.” Which reminds us that our personal God is also an eternal God, Creator and Lord of the universe.

This morning’s text gives us a window into the personalities and character of Abraham, Sarah, and God. The Abraham we meet in Genesis 18 is first and foremost hospitable. In fact, I considered calling my sermon “Hustling Hospitality.” Did you notice how much hustling around Abraham did when he encountered the three strangers? He “ran from the tent entrance to meet them.” After falling all over himself greeting them, and offering them water and bread, that they might refresh themselves and wash their feet, he “hastened [back] into the tent to Sarah,” and asked her to “quickly” bake three cakes of bread, using the choicest flour. Next he “ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant.” Who, by the way “hastened to prepare it.” Perhaps the servant had learned the hard way to be prompt and punctual when Abraham was concerned.

All of this hustling was obviously out of great respect to the three visitors. Almost as if Abraham knew that they were not merely human, but divine. When he first greeted them the story says that he “bowed to the ground.” He stood respectfully beside them under the tree while they sat and rested and ate. And yet the text gives no indication, at least explicitly, that he recognized them for who they were, even when they somehow knew Sarah’s name, and even though one of them was clearly speaking with Yahweh’s own voice. We’re left to conclude that hospitality was simply one of Abraham’s gifts, and gift he shared with everyone and anyone.

And what do we learn from this story about Sarah? She did her typical, faithful, dutiful duty by quickly making the cakes Abraham requested. Maybe she too had learned the hard way to snap to it when her husband wanted something. Sarah also had a sneaky side to her. The way she stood just out of sight inside the tent, eavesdropping on the strangers’ conversation. And then there was her laugh, which she mistakenly thought no one else could hear. As the one guest recognized, it was a laugh of disbelief, and cynicism, and self-derision. Did you notice how often the text mentions how old Abraham and Sarah are? Verse 11: “Now Abraham and Sarah

were old, advanced in age.” Over the hill. All washed up. What other sayings and euphemisms could we add? Their best years were behind them. They’re out of gas. In the twilight of their lives. Circling the drain. And in case we missed the significance of this, the text adds that “it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” How’s that for a euphemism? It very subtly communicates that in Sarah’s time, a woman’s worth and purpose was closely connected to her ability to bear children. And Sarah had lost that ability. She had lost her worth.

It’s hard growing old, isn’t it? I’ve heard many of you say that. We all face it, and we can’t escape it. From the moment we were born we begin aging. And we don’t stop aging until the day we die. In between our birth and our death there’s a lot of good stuff, but life is often a struggle, in which we try desperately to prove to ourselves that we are worthy, that we have worth. Unfortunately, our aging can seem to work against us as bit by bit, joint by joint, brain cell by brain cell we lose our vitality.

I’ve been thinking a lot about Roland and Marjorie Krause. (For those of you that might not know, Roland died this past Tuesday. He was buried yesterday in the Goessel Mennonite Church Cemetery next to beloved wife Marjorie, and his memorial service is this afternoon. Whew, what a weekend!

Like Abraham and Sarah, Roland and Marjorie each had their unique personalities and gifts and quirks. Marjorie was a consummate homemaker and attentive mother to their four children. Roland had a long career as a medical doctor, and that career was an important source of his identity and probably his self-worth. Both Roland and Marjorie were faithful, long-term members of this church. In the twenty years Lois and I have been pastors here, I’ve watched them as they contributed in so many wonderful ways to the life of our church. I’ve also watched them as year by year they grew older, as bit by bit, hip joint by hip joint they lost their vitality. What else did they lose? Their purpose? Their worth?

Which brings us back to Sarah’s laugh. Which she denied, but there was no denying it. The man/the LORD/Yahweh heard it, and said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”

What a question! It’s one of those Bible verses that is so profound, and thought provoking, and faith provoking, it should be on everybody’s refrigerator, or bulletin board. One of the commentators I read this past week proposed that an honest answer to this question really must be both “no” (nothing is too wonderful for the LORD), and “yes” (some things are too wonderful for the LORD). No, because by definition the God who created life, who created us, who is the eternal “I am” can do anything God wants. Period. But let us not forget that Yahweh created us human, mortal. Our lives have God-ordained limits. As the commentator put it, God’s action and intervention in our lives by definition must be true to God’s character. God may or may not grant us everything we ask for. God will not keep us from aging. God will not keep us from dying.

Nevertheless, the man/the LORD/Yahweh said to Abraham and Sarah, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” And then God added, “At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” Sarah still didn’t believe it. But three chapters later, with a whole lot of other stuff happening in between, we read in chapter twenty-one, verse one that “The LORD Yahweh dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD Yahweh did for Sarah as he

had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.”

There will be times in our lives when we worry about our worth and vitality, when we worry that God’s promises to us are in peril. Today’s story reminds us, vividly and creatively, that God’s promise is never in peril. God’s purpose and plan for our lives is solid, and can be trusted.

Roland and Marjorie both lost a lot as they aged. As will we all. It seems clear that one of life’s most important yet difficult lessons is learning to let go. But this story reminds us that for some things we are never too old. We are never too old for surprises. We are never too old to love and be loved. We are never too old to proclaim God’s goodness and faithfulness. We are never too old to bear fruit.

Do you want to know what my favorite part of this story is, and what may very well be the most important part of this story? Sarah’s laugh. In 21:5-6 we read, “Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, ‘God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.’” At first (in chapter 18) Sarah’s laugh was one of cynicism and disbelief and self-derision. But it became (in chapter 21) a laugh of joy and delight. May the same be true for us, as we go through our lives.

Amen.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

Tell about someone you know who aged well. What did they lose? What did they hang on to?

When you think about Roland and Marjorie, what are some of the things they held on to as they aged? What are some of the ways in which they continued to bear fruit?

What are some of the things you are losing or have already lost as you age?

What do you think about the question “Is anything too improbable for the Lord?” Is the answer yes or no?

What have been some times or ways in which God has surprised you?

Are you more like Abraham or Sarah?

How has your self-worth changed over the years?