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Family Matters: When All You Ever Wanted Isn't Enough

Genesis 17:15-17

You can imagine the headline on one of those supermarket tabloids:

Ninety-Year-Old Woman Gives Birth! Dad is 100! Under the headline would be a picture with the faces of Abraham and Sarah pasted on the bodies of 20-year-olds. Up in the corner there would be a little inset picture of Hagar and her son, Ishmael. Nothing like a great scandal! With this story, the tabloids would sell like hot cakes!

And what a great story it is – Abraham is promised the world as he is to become the father who will be remembered from generation to generation. He, an old man without children, will become the father of many nations! As God makes this promise, Abraham falls on his knees in awe, wonder and praise. Then he leaves his homeland and sets out to serve God. He will not worship the many idols of his father and his tribe. No, Abraham will serve only one God, Yahweh. Yet over time, doubt creeps into the mind and heart of Abraham and it is his wife, Sarah, who gets the creative urge. You have to give her credit, she believes in the promise that God has given Abraham--she just doesn't trust that God's plan is going to work. If Abraham and Sarah were going to be the parents of the nations, she figures they would have started having children earlier, like back when they were in their 60s or early 70s. Abraham loses faith in God's plan, so Sarah comes up with a new plan. It will be Hagar who bears Abraham a son and then all will be right in the world. Of course, Hagar gets pregnant and Sarah's creative plan turns into an absolute mess!

Humans have been getting creative since the beginning of time. We love the promises of God, we love the vision of the kingdom of God, but we struggle to live into God's promises. We delude ourselves into thinking that we have a better plan. We see it over and over in scripture, starting with Adam and Eve. Where two or more are gathered, someone is bound to try and improve upon God's plan.

For more than two decades, I have spent a significant amount of time with young couples who are engaged. I love to sit down with couples planning their weddings and hear their love stories. The word "perfect" is often used as they describe each other. Sometimes it is the bride, other times the groom, who declares "We are just perfect together!" She may describe him as easy going and sensitive. He may mention that she is strong and knows what she wants. There is that glow around young love. There is an idealism that is absolutely beautiful.

When the wedding day comes, vows are exchanged with heartfelt sincerity. The promises are made with devotion and the best of intentions. You can hear those familiar words, "to have and

to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, 'till death do us part.' This is my solemn vow.”

However, now and again a couple that was “perfect for each other” when they exchanged vows, experience less than perfection as they live into those promises.

The woman who called her fiancé easy going is now using the word ”lazy” to describe her husband. The man who admired his fiancée’s strength, is now claiming that as a wife she is overbearing. Knowing what she wants is no longer admirable but rather is seen as high maintenance and self-centered.

We love the promises, but the challenge is living into those promises. Abraham loved the promise of God, but over time, he found it difficult to live into that promise. He waited 11 years after God’s declaration without the promised son. No wonder Sarah got creative. She had a sense that time was running out for this vow. So, she came up with a plan, and when it went wrong, very wrong, whom does she blame? Abraham, of course! It is so human and “knows what she wants” Sarah and easy-going Abraham want no part of cleaning up the mess.

I flew to Florida for a couple of days this week. Short stay, long story, but I ended up at the Orlando International Airport on Friday evening. As I am sure you know, Orlando is home of one of the happiest places on earth, Disney World. The airport was full of families who had obviously been to Disney World. I am sure that many of these families had saved for and looked forward to their trip to this famous amusement park. I am confident that they marveled at the attractions and delighted in the rides. Little girls dressed as princesses and little boys sporting hats with Mickey Mouse ears could be seen all over the airport. Adorable as they looked, many of them were past tired and had entered the zone of exhaustion. Whining and sobbing could be heard at every turn. Little ones were kicking siblings and pouting with parents. One father was speaking to whom I thought must be his son or daughter as he repeated several times, “Come here!” pointing to a place right before him, but when I looked at the person he was speaking to, it was not a wayward child, it was his wife! Another woman was berating her husband about an item he left in the rental car. Her husband gently tried to remind her that she had the item in her possession last. The wife, however, continued to blame her husband.

There was the promise of the perfect vacation, taking the children to Disney World and having days of fun in the sun, but as it turns out, living into the promise is not so easy. There was pain and conflict and fatigue - none of which was on the original agenda.

God promised the world to Abraham. Think about that. God promised Abraham everything that Abraham ever wanted! God singled Abraham out and offered him a new name, a new land and a new life. But trusting God was more than Abraham could deliver. He loved the promise, the promise was perfect, but he just could not live into it. The distance between the promise and the reality took too long, it seemed too impossible and Abraham’s doubt overwhelmed his faith. So, when Sarah came up with a plan, Abraham went along.

God has given us not only this world, but also the world beyond this life. We have the perfect promise from God – forgiveness that abounds, love that is eternal and the vision of a kingdom of

justice and peace. We have the promise, but like Abraham, our challenge is living into it. Our challenge is taking the gift of God in Jesus Christ and living as Jesus has taught us. Our challenge is embracing what seems too good to be true, what seems utterly impossible and living into it. Our challenge is looking in the mirror and looking at our culture and imagining that God loves us and desires God's best for us. For God's best is better than anything this world can offer us.

Like Abraham, we doubt. We doubt that God loves us so completely. We cannot believe that God holds us so dear. We doubt that God knows us, every inch of us, and continues to remain faithful to us. God, ever ready to forgive, ever longing for our unconditional love, remains steadfast in dedication to us.

God has given us all we ever wanted, and yet, we doubt, and in our doubts, we plan, we attempt to give God a hand, and like Sarah, we get creative. And when our creativity takes us away from God's promises, away from the goodness that God desires for us, we too find ourselves making a mess! We have been given all we ever wanted or needed and instead of building our lives upon the sure promises of God, we dilute them with our impatience and our doubt, and our constant pursuit of more.

Our lack of satisfaction burns like hot sand under our feet. Ever wanting something more, we spend a lifetime in pursuit of something that will quench our restlessness.

The poet Mary Oliver writes these words in the final verse of her poem *The Summer Day*: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

The one wild and precious life is our gift from God. Not only is this day a gift, but God also promises to be faithful to us in this day and every day. God has shown us the way to live in the life of Jesus. God sees within each and every one of us potential and promise. God is not seeking our perfection, but rather our trust, our devotion, so that we live out our days as worship, living God's praise, living God's blessing, living God's trust, living God's promise.

I have shared before that I have a few words that I tend to type incorrectly over and over again. It is as if my fingers have a mind of their own. One of those words is "united." In that we are United Methodists, I type that word frequently. However, I type untied more often than I type united. When it comes to humanity and the promises of God, we are often more untied than united. God is sure. God is constant, but we, we love the promises, we love forgiveness, we love knowing that God is with us now and always, but like Abraham, we doubt that God will ultimately deliver on God's word.

Sarah and Abraham make a mess out of their lives. Yet, God will not be deterred. God vows to Abraham that another child will be born. Abraham laughs, Sarah laughs and the child that is born is named Isaac, meaning laughter.

Laugh all you want. God's promises are sure and true. Life may not have turned out exactly the way you have planned, but it is never too late to lean into the promises of God. It is never too late to stand before God and declare that we have made a mess. On our own, you can depend

upon our making a mess of whatever we touch. Our own plans pale in the light of God's hope for us.

All of our dreams may not have come true. We may not have good health, we may not have the career we expected, we may not have children or grandchildren, we may not have found the love of our life, we may not have financial security, we may not have - you fill in the blank - but we do have all we ever need – we have the love of God, the vision for God's kingdom and the community of Christ to call family. These people who sit near you are not just strangers on the journey, they are your family, your extended family of faith and like you they are living into the promises of God one day at a time.

In a world where we are reluctant to experience any delayed gratification, we find ourselves relating with Abraham, the father of the three faith traditions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. He was not perfect, he too was impatient, he struggled to trust God, he laughed at God's plan and yet, God saw all the potential and promise God needed to offer Abraham the world.

God's covenant with us is strong and sure this day. God is with us. God continues to bless us and lead us. Feel it - not just the knowledge that God is in our midst, but feel it in your heart; in your soul. God is here with you right now. God sees promise and potential in you no matter your age. God is good and God's plan for you, God's plan for me is filled with goodness.

May we vow anew to God this morning, married or not, these words of promise. Please repeat after me:

From this day forward...

For better or worse...

For richer for poorer...

In sickness and health...

To love and to cherish...

Not even death shall us part...

Almighty and loving God, this is my solemn vow.