

Sermon – “The young and the old”

Glorifying youth – honouring experience – finding a way to encourage relationships among the generations. How can we be better? What does the Lord require of us?

This morning we consider two wildly different texts; each one challenges us to find meaning, each offering a different look at the relationship between the young and the old. And while there is ancient cultural bias at work in both passages – we have added our own complications down the years...

Abraham is the epitome of the faithful elder statesman – a patriarch, we call him – meant in the most generous, positive understanding of the word. Oh, and his equally faithful wife, Sarah. To them came the first promises of God. They are ancient and wise and to be honoured. Fine examples of faithfulness...for a particular generation. For the rest of us – something to aim for.

This morning’s story is an interesting encounter that brings God’s promise of a son to light. Mysterious travellers who turn out to be Holy messengers – affirming God’s promise of a child – holding Abraham to the whole of God’s promise, despite his advancing years. This text gives us a new look at what it means to be faithful in our old age.

While the text first seems to be about Abraham’s hospitality, it quickly takes a turn. God promises a son – and Sarah laughs at this ridiculous idea. Old age brings remarkable clarity of thought, and Sarah knows false hope when she hears it. But against all the odds, and in due season, Sarah bears a child – named for the noise his mother made at the very thought of his birth: y’itzak – (he laughs).

It is common to imagine that the grown ups are the key figures in this little drama: Three strangers, the revered patriarch, and his wife. It is through this odd relationship that God is revealed, and through which God’s promise is brought to life. But imagine this story without the promise of a child. Isaac is a key figure, even before his much-anticipated birth. There is more to this than meet the eye.

And then there’s Jesus – working his way toward Jerusalem, in the company of his faithful disciples – gathering curious crowds where ever he goes. People push their children to the front of the mob, seeking a blessing for the future. And the disciples – business-like to a man – reject the idea that children have a place in this project. The adults are not the heroes of this story.

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Jesus’ words have driven our congregational hopes for as long as we can remember: “Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God...” We set our hopes on children – we dream of their slow but steady rise through the Sunday School program and long for the day when they take their place as ‘properly obedient and fabulously faithful young people, ready to ‘pick up where we leave off...’ our obsession with training children up in the way they should go has not really worked out as we had hoped.

And this particular meeting of Abraham, Sarah, and the Lord has been turned into an unreasonable expectation of faith from those who are older. (*Without putting too fine a point on it, Sarah’s inability to bear children had, too this point, left her entirely on the margins of the story.*) We read this story and are in danger of glorifying the faith of the aged as being the pinnacle of holy living. And in the here and now, we still struggle to know how to strike a balance between venerating the young and honouring the old. I’m left to wonder if these texts are trying to offer us another way.

The glorification of Abraham’s ‘faithfulness’ is well established. The gift of a son at such a late stage of their lives is seen as both confirmation of God’s promise and affirmation of the faith of this couple that left everything at the call of God. ***But the reaction of Sarah to all this*** suggests that piety might have a different flavour in a senior citizen. There is room for doubt. There is room for laughter. There is room to question God – even in the most respected of our ancestors in faith. The name that is given this child of promise echoes through history as proof of Sarah’s incredulity. To laugh at God is (apparently) not a sin – it is, at times, a necessity.

And then we have the gospel. Far from a commandment to be faithful from a young age (or else!) what if Jesus is encouraging a child-like approach to the things of God? To be, like children, full of questions, and wonder, and joy, and hope – it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

Taken together, I begin to see Sarah differently – not as a shuffling old woman (for whom childbirth and every other opportunity of life has well and truly passed) – but as someone with a twinkle in her eye, and an endless list of questions for God about the way life seems to be unfolding.

Thinking differently about these ancient lessons, we might recognize that our children have as much to teach us as our senior citizens – and that neither should be left on the edges of a life of faith.