

<Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; Matthew 9:35-10:8>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Our lives are filled with promises. Some of them we're conscious of, though they're so routine that we may only give them the briefest of thoughts.

I authorize payment of this amount to the vendor, from the bank account that I have indicated.

By signing this contract I agree to pay a set amount on the 15th of each month for the goods or services rendered.

Some of our promises are much more intentional and are not given without a lot of forethought and preparation.

I take you as my spouse, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, as long as we both shall live.

I pledge to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

And other promises are agreed to without necessarily reading the entirety of the agreement, with very little thought as to what we're agreeing to, such as the Terms and Conditions of a software update on our devices. Though I know there are some of you have read those in their entirety.

What's the last promise you made? Was it a promise to a spouse to take care of a chore around the house, that you would actually get to it (even if you haven't gotten to it yet)? Was it a promise to make a phone call, or plan a trip, or look over information in order to make a decision? Was it a promise to be at an event for your child or relative?

Some promises we dream of seeing realized, with very little hope of ever actually seeing them come to fruition. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was one such person who carried such an empty hope.

Much has happened in the story of Abraham and Sarah since our reading last week when God told Abram to get up and go, and that God would be with him throughout. Abram and Sarai's names have been changed, they have traveled far and encountered much, and their marriage has been somewhat tested. And now, though, if you can believe it, we will come to perhaps the biggest divine encounter that Abraham and Sarah have yet faced, and perhaps will face. As we will see, Sarah certainly couldn't believe it.

What's a promise that you've had a difficult time believing? Something that you hoped could be true, but seemed unattainable; or something you feared to be true, and didn't know how to comprehend? That's very much the case with Sarah. As Abraham entertains three mysterious guests, showing them the fullness of hospitality and

welcome, Sarah overhears their conversation, and with it, the promise that God will bless Abraham and Sarah with a child, from which will come nations.

Sarah, remember, is well past child-bearing age. Any such hopes have long been cast aside and given up. But now...now here are these strangers, making a promise on behalf of God that Sarah will conceive and give birth. How might you respond, overhearing such a promise in such a situation?

Sarah laughs. She laughs, perhaps to keep from crying, because she cannot believe the truth or even possibility of such a promise. She laughs, because even the glimmer of an idea of possibility would threaten to bring back all the grief that has been carried and buried over a life she was never able to realize. She laughs, and such laughter belies her fear, and the unknown angels being entertained are aware, and respond with the reminder, “is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

What do we give our promises to? Who we make our promises to, and the nature of those promises, can reflect a lot of our character both to the world and to our own selves. And, looking at the promises of God, and the ways in which those promises are realized, can help us understand a great deal about the person and nature of God, as well.

The disciples were in just such a position to hear a new promise from the One they were coming to understand as the Son of God, the Messiah, as he taught them more of the work of God. And in order to understand the nature and the work of God, the nature and work of their discipleship, they needed to realize the depth of the situation, first.

Matthew’s gospel remarks that Jesus, surrounded by the crowds, “Has compassion for them.” This goes beyond a mere sense of pity, or a willingness to try and meet their needs. The way the Greek is written, and the words which are used, suggest to the listener the deep reality of a people who “are made to be helpless, harassed to the point that it is impacting not only their present, but also their future well-being,” as one commentator puts it. They go on to reflect, “This is not the way it’s supposed to be! This is not God’s design for the people of God - let alone for humanity” (Chelsey Harmon, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*).

Furthermore, “This failure goes far beyond a lack of good spiritual leadership among [the people]: the harvest for compassion is large, but the workers committed to it are few” (*ibid*).

The promises of God, which have been shaped and proclaimed and reflected through the history of God’s people, are being unfulfilled, and this is an unacceptable state of the situation in the eyes of God’s Son. The ‘harvest’ - the opportunity to see God’s promises of health and wholeness, of community and connection, of leadership and relationship - the ‘harvest’ to see these promises fulfilled and realized is great, but the laborers are few. “Jesus looks around at his disciples and tells them to pray for a growth in willingness to become caregivers, then he sends them out as the answer to the

prayer” (*ibid*). And not only sends them out, but sends them out with nothing extra. And in the midst of that, provides for them in every way, making sure that they, themselves, do not fall victim to an unfulfilled promise.

We don't always live into our promises. Many times we do, and I believe we strive to see our promises fulfilled, but there are occasions when it becomes beyond us. Situations change, urgent demands come up, life happens. But God's promises are not our promises, and God is more capable than we are. In fact, when we are aligned to God's promises, we ourselves become capable in the Spirit of God.

What promise is God asking you to claim, and live into, as a disciple of God? As a member of this church? As one called to proclaim God's Kingdom? This is truly the question before us, and in a few moments I'm going to give you a chance to talk about that amongst yourselves at your tables. But before we do that, let's return briefly to Sarah and God's promise to her and Abraham.

Sarah, as it turns out, does indeed become pregnant and bears a son, whom is named Isaac, meaning, “God has brought laughter.” Promise made; promise fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah have a child, who continues to bring further life into the world. Jesus embodies God's promise of care and compassion to the people, and then sends the disciples to do likewise, providing for them, as well. What promise is God asking you to claim, and live into, as a disciple of God? Pray on that for a few moments, and then, as you feel able, discuss it amongst those who are at your table with you. And know that, as you do so, God's promises will be fulfilled. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)
Worship in the Park Sunday 2026*