Do you remember that Sunday School song: “Father Abraham had many kids, many kids had Father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you, so let’s all praise the Lord!” They call him “father” because he is considered the father of the Hebrew nation; he is the first person in the bible to be called a “Hebrew”. All Jews trace their ancestry to Abraham; therefore so do all Christians.

In Genesis 12, we read that God promises to bless Abraham and make of him a great nation. But, many years pass and Abraham and Sarah, well, they get older; it seems that their biological clock has quit ticking. What happened to this promise to make of his children a great nation? There are no children. Abraham is losing hope.

In Genesis 15:5, God comes to Abraham in a vision and tells him not to be afraid. Abraham then tells God of his doubt in the promise God had made to him earlier “What can you give me since I remain childless?” God tells Abraham to look up at the stars and try to count them, promising that Abraham and Sarah will have offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. It would take hundreds of years for the girls and boys, men and women who came after them to become like those millions of lights shining in the night, but together these generations of descendents would be the living lights, that together fulfill the promise God made to Abraham.

Several things stand out for me in this story, four in particular.

1. This is a story about someone receiving a call and promise from God late in life. The promise is repeated even though it seems too late to be true. The second half (or final third depending on how you count it) of Abraham’s life is when the story begins. In middle age, as I see my time getting shorter and my list of all I want to learn and do just getting longer, this story offers hope!

2. God’s promise does not give Abraham and Sarah an easy life; in fact they face many dangers and difficulties on their way to the fulfillment of God’s promises to them. The sorrows and challenges of their lives are not indicators of God’s absence or predictors of future failures. They simply are part of human experience. God’s time is greater than our individual life spans because God takes our efforts and multiplies them even after our deaths from this world. Even after our lights have gone out and our bodies are cold, the light we carried spreads beyond us far into the future.

3. God’s promises did not depend on Abraham and Sarah’s behavior and faithful responses. Many times they demonstrated doubt in God’s promises and many times they made mistakes and sinned. Those who preach that God rewards those who are good and punishes those who are bad have obviously never spent much time reading the scriptures. Every hero and heroine of our faith was also a flawed human being who made mistakes and who doubted their call. If Abraham and
Sarah are the parents of our faith, as it says in many places throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, then that is good news for those of us who are less than perfect too.

4. The promises of God are inclusive not exclusive. Paul explains in the Romans passage we read this morning that God’s blessing of Abraham proves that “God is the God of the circumcised and uncircumcised.” This was good news for the Gentiles that he was reaching out to...they were not real thrilled with the whole circumcision requirement. Paul is reassuring them that God accepts them even though they are not officially Jewish. He proves his argument by pointing out that Abraham and Sarah were blessed before God gave Moses the gift of the law and that Abraham was not circumcised. (and all the men at the time said “amen!”)

So, in summary:

1. What seems like “too late” to us may just be the beginning of something amazing for God.
2. Being blessed by God does not include having an easy life but in fact means being called to do difficult, risky things. It also means that when misfortune finds us, when pain, sorrow, or fear are with us in our waking and our sleeping, God is with us, pulling, luring us forward into what might yet be possible, what healing, solace, and new beginnings can be created.
3. God’s blessings are not given to perfect people and are not removed because people mess up or sin.
4. God’s presence and promises are offered not just to those we agree with, but also to those who differ than us in significant ways.

Abraham and Sarah thought it was too late for God’s promise to be fulfilled in their lives. I have sat with countless clients struggling with the sorrows of infertility. Some have gone to great lengths to conceive, some have adopted, and some have in the midst of deep grief instead poured themselves into the lives of other children in a variety of ways. Many of us have been blessed by the wisdom and nurture of those who were not our actual parents who have helped us become who we are and who we will pass onto others as well. This too is a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. On those days when we our lives feel insignificant or when we haven’t measured up to all we had hoped to become, consider the fact that generations from now, the impact of your life may be felt in ways you cannot even imagine, by people who may never know your name, but who benefited from your life, your light in some way. That is a promise you can stand on.

Then, there is this whole idea of being old, too old, beyond beginning anything. Well, Abraham and Sarah challenge that don’t they! We are never too old to make a difference, to receive blessings, and to realize dreams! Grandma Moses began painting in her late 70s and didn’t become famous until her 90s. After retirement, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrews founded the AARP, making health insurance for those over 65 a reality! Nelson Mandela was 76 when he became president of South Africa. Benjamin Franklin was 70 when he signed the Declaration of Independence. Ghandi was 61 when he led the march to the sea that became 60,000 strong and helped win India’s independence. And these are just the
famous people! The silver hair generation (of which I am quickly becoming a member) is a place where God is at work to begin new achievements as well as sustaining well-established ones! The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story that reminds us that time is measured in meaning not in minutes and there is no age where one becomes too old to serve God, too old for God to bless. That is a promise you can stand on.

There is a popular notion that God’s promises of blessings means that we will not suffer. This leads to many problems. Whenever we experience hardship, loss, or pain, we immediately wonder what we have done wrong, why God is punishing us. When others are experiencing material wealth or good health, we wonder why God loves them more, why their reward it so much more than others. Good people suffer and cruel people may be rich and successful. Talented people, brilliant people may or may not be moral and compassionate people. Poor people, uneducated people, may in fact posses great wisdom and spiritual treasures greater than anything a bank can contain. Setbacks are part of the process of moving forward; failures are necessary for eventual success; and when our hearts have been broken it does not mean that God has stopped creating blessings for our lives. That is a promise you can stand on.

When you hear some preacher lifting up Abraham’s faithfulness as the reason God blessed him, remember this: Abraham sought God’s reassurance during those times and found God’s presence sustaining his hope. When all we have to offer to God is our failures, mistakes, or sins it is an act of faith to bring them before God. When anyone tries to tell you that the bible is filled with stories of perfect people who obeyed God and were rewarded, read it again! I cannot even think about one story where God called someone because they were without sin; in fact seldom does the person God calls seem like the right person for the job…even they say “Who me? You don’t want me!” and then proceed to list all the reasons why they are unsuitable!

Abraham’s faithfulness and founding of our faith was not because he never doubted, never tried to make things happen on his own terms (like using Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar, to bear him an heir), and never acted immorally because he was afraid (like lying that his wife Sarah was just his sister and marrying her off to a foreign king in exchange for the security it brought). He is faithful because he continues to fall and to stand back up on the promises of God. When you fall down, or when you let yourself and other’s down, God’s presence is a promise to help you pick yourself up and stand on.

There are those today who want to put up barriers where God puts up welcome signs. The scriptures and human history are both filled with stories of people trying to charge for what God gives away free, to all. Three great faiths call Abraham and Sarah their parents: Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. Especially today this is an important reminder that we are all one, we are all cousins who share the same ancestry and are heirs to the same promise of sustaining presence and ongoing blessings that that God gave to Abraham and Sarah. God did not promise Abraham that all his offspring would be identical, any more than our any of our children are identical, but that they would be blessings. It is we who struggle with the differences, seeing them not as gifts from God but as threats to the particularities we construct about our faith.
We are standing on the promises of God, not of religion, not of our culture, not even of our own best intentions. God’s promises do not rely on our actions, our reactions, or our ability to keep the promises we make to God in return. Like Abraham, we can move forward in our lives because we move and live and die within the sustaining Presence of God. We can take a stand, even when we are afraid, because we are standing on the promises of God. We can stand back up each time we fall and fail, because we are standing on the promises of God. We can hope even when all hope seems lost, because ours is a God who as we read this morning: “gives life to the dead and who calls things that are not as though they were”. We are standing on the promises of God and it is in these promises that we find our hope, our strength, and our union with all the others who are standing on God’s promises too. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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