

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

First Sunday of Advent – December 3, 2017

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Genesis 18:1-14, 21:1-7

FOR REFLECTION

“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”

- Desmond Tutu, South African Anglican Archbishop, Educator, Civil Rights Activist (b.1931)

Hope: Sarah

This story is long and messy – 7 chapters and at least 14 years of living.

Genesis 15 Abram is promised a birth child (by The Lord)

Genesis 16 Hagar (Sarai’s slave) is raped & Ishmael is born (Abram 86)

Genesis 17 (13 years later) Names are changed to Abraham and Sarah – We hear an alternate version of the covenant from Chapter 15 – A child is explicitly promised to Sarah (by The Lord) – he laughs (Abraham 99)

Genesis 18 Yet another version of the promise / annunciation of Isaac (by 3 men – The Lord) – she laughs (Sarah 89)

Genesis 19 Sodom & Gomorrah are destroyed by the same 3 men (The Lord)

Genesis 20 Move from the Plain of Sodom to Gerar – Fear of the king causes Abraham to claim that Sarah is his sister – The king claims her as his own but is warned by God not to sleep with her because she is married – When cleaning up the mess Sarah is revealed to be Abraham’s wife and also his half-sister by their father

Genesis 21 Isaac is conceived and born (Abraham 100, Sarah 90)

This is a long and messy story – a lot of shenanigans go on – promises are misunderstood – rape and lies and destruction nearly derail the outcome.

But the humanly-long-for-and-divinely-promised-child is finally born.

And the story goes on from there.

If we are to look at this story as a standard of HOPE, then we have to step back and keep the long-view. These larger-than-life characters – chosen father and mother of a great nation – ancestors in faith – these people are as flawed as they come. They have trouble believing the outrageous promises of their Creator and both laugh out loud.

They second-guess what is supposed to happen, raping, lying, treating others abominably. But, in the end, they and G-d fulfil the expectations of the covenant and get where they want to be.

And they get there in their old age. Maintaining HOPE for an entire lifetime is one heck of a job. Keeping the long-view is nearly impossible while dealing with the details of daily life. Of COURSE they had some trouble along the way!

I was one of those people who wanted children my entire life. I thought it would just happen in the course of things. It didn't – and I had some choice words with G-d along the way. A number of years before I met John, I had a very intense dream. In the dream, I gave birth to a boy-child who was already about two years old – already talking and walking. The dream child was understood to be “indigenous” – filled with color and stories and life energy. He was the epitome of what I hoped for.

Over the years I went through 10 fertility experiments (which is what they were in my day) – spending all of my savings, two inheritances and three tax refunds on medical intervention. My marriage, already questionable, ended. And my inherited anxiety disorder went through the roof – leading me to self-intervention and life-saving medication.

I gave up on men – and then met John.

I gave up on marriage – and then married John.

We explored adoption for three-and-a-half years. I gave up on adoption and turned our “nursery” back into a guest room.

And a week later we got a call from our social worker offering us an infant – a mixed-race child that no one else on her list was interested in because they wanted a baby that looked like them.

I was 51. John was 46. Peter was 2 weeks old when we became a family.

Was the dream I had years earlier a promise from G-d? Perhaps.

But I was childless for 51 years and understand completely that the prayers of women longing for children are not necessarily answered in the affirmative.

Looking back, I COULD say that G-d was preparing me – readying us – making us wait for the birth of the child that was intended for us.

But if Peter had never arrived, I could also say that I was given a chance to pastor and parent numerous kids – at camp, as a youth minister, as an aunt and cousin and friend.

Did I lose hope like Sarah? Did I try to play G-d and make an end run around the divine plan? You bet I did.

But if I take the long view – if I let go of what I THOUGHT was supposed to happen and see what actually DID happen – I can perceive in my long and messy story a thread of HOPE woven throughout. I gave up repeatedly – and then tried again – repeatedly.

Perhaps that is how HOPE works. It's not something that can be sustained in every moment. It is something that flares up, dies down and has to be stoked and fed to gain strength again.

And this is a good reason for us to meet together – here – however often we can make it. This is a place where and a gathering of people with whom HOPE can be stoked and rekindled and fed to a blazing bonfire.

Mt. Hollywood Congregational UCC – for a hundred years – has had to do the same thing for generations of Angelinos in this community. It was a source of support and hope for working people in the early labor movements. It was a place of inclusion and love for people marginalized because of color, ethnicity or income – and, later, sexual orientation and identity. It protected real estate and personal property for Japanese Americans whose civil rights were violated and whose communities were incarcerated. It stood strong against the practice of warfare in any number of violent manifestations. It was an institution that fostered relationships where there were divisions.

And it was said by many, “There is a light here...”

Mt. Hollywood UCC – the “it” of 100 years – was and is not a building or an institution. “It” is now and has always been a “Beloved Community” – which means people. This gathering – in this room – continues to be that Beloved Community – continues to stand on the side of the poor and marginalized, the over-taxed and under-insured. We may look like embers of a dying fire – but we are also the hot coals upon which the bonfire of HOPE is being built.

If we take the long view, this is the time in which we renew our covenant with our Maker – and the future is conceived. This is the moment in which we see in one another our allies and compatriots, our collaborators in the process of resisting the great Greed which has befallen the elite.

This year, this decade, this time in history may seem dark and filled with mean-spiritedness and evil glee. We may be tempted by our own weariness, feelings of despair and resignation – to abandon HOPE – to succumb to numbness and lose ourselves in alternate realities.

But there is a light HERE.

In the eyes and hearts and hands of the people in this room, HOPE can be rekindled. And G-d's Vision, G-d's Promises can be reclaimed.

Genesis 18:1-14, 21:1-7

18:1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. ""

9 They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' 10 Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' 13 The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" 14 Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.'

21:1 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. 2 Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' 7 And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'