Healing & Liberation

A Meditation on Genesis 18: 1 – 15 and Matthew 9: 35 – 10:8

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church June 14, 2020

25 years. Sarah had been waiting 25 years for God’s promise of a family to come to fruition. She had waited 25 years to carry a child, to bear a child, to rock a child in her arms. In those 25 years, she had moved way past disappointment. Waves of grief had washed over her time and time again. She had been dragged through the denial, the anger, the depression, the bargaining, the acceptance so many times that she had stopped paying attention.

God had promised Sarah & Abraham as many children as stars in the heavens, but now that seemed like a joke. A cruel joke. When she tried to force God’s hand by sending her servant Hagar to sleep with her husband, she only made things worse. Successful? Yes. But it was a no-win situation: abusive to Hagar, abusive to the child born to her, and a torment for Sarah. On top of her grief she added jealousy, insecurity, and bitterness. This was not a happy home.

Into all this chaos, God brings laughter to their tent. God, in the guise of three strangers, appears outside their home, and Abraham rushes to welcome them. Though this was the expected practice, Abraham seems to sense these guests are “special.” He begs them to stay, he has his wife break out enough fine flour to make 30 loaves of bread, and he has a feast prepared for them. Though we never hear the three call Abraham by name, they ask specifically about his wife, Sarah. They renew God’s promise to *Sarah* that *she* will have a child. “The joke’s on them,” she laughs to herself, as she imagines their promised return. But, according to this story, God not only hears her laugh to herself, but knows her thoughts, and calls her out for laughing. Though she denies the laughter, God says, “I know the sound of your voice. I know you laughed. You have reason to doubt.” God understood what Sarah’s laughter implied.

Sarah laughed. After 25 years of waiting, did Sarah collapse to the ground, laughing until the laughter turned to tears, and then back to laughter again? And while there, on her knees, did she talk with God? Did she name the mistakes she had made, mistakes which had deeply wounded both Hagar and Ishmael? Did she confess her jealousy? Did she acknowledge her doubt that God’s promise would be realized? And while she was praying, did she hear the name “Isaac,” “Laughter” and know her child would carry a name that would forever reminder her of the pain, the waiting, the relief, the doubt? Her child would be named “Laughter,” so that she would remember both the suffering and the joy.

*[Avery will be preaching more about Hagar next week, so we will leave the additional complexities of Hagar and Ishmael’s story until then, but it is imperative to include these family members in any discussion of Abraham and Sarah. We must name the fractures in the story of our faith.]*

God, the stranger, had come among them. God had entered into the chaos of their lives, the disbelief, the damage and had offered them laughter. God had come to their home to restore them, all of them, and to place their feet back on the path to life. Sometimes, Sarah reminds us, our work is in the waiting. Sometimes, Jesus reminds us, it is *not.*

Our gospel story may seem, on its surface, to be completely unrelated to Abraham and Sarah’s lives, but let’s look at what God is doing here. Jesus names the pain that he sees: the people are like sheep without a shepherd. They are vulnerable, hungry, hurting. They are “harassed and helpless.” He teaches and preaches, he brings healing, and he sends his disciples out to do the same thing.

He gives them these instructions:

As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. (Matthew 10: 7 – 8a) Or, as Karoline Lewis writes, “it seems that two acts of discipleship according to Matthew are critical: healing and liberation.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Healing and liberation. Is that not what God brought to Sarah, to Abraham, to Hagar? Healing from the resentment, from the abuse (Hagar), from the grief. Liberation from a season of despair and hopelessness. Liberation from barrenness. Healing and liberation to a fractured family.

Healing and liberation: promises proclaimed by the Hebrew prophets, realities that can only come with the willingness of the people to examine their hearts, change their ways. The willingness of the people to examine *our* hearts, change *our* ways.

Jesus says:

Heal the sick.

Raise the dead.

Cleanse those who have leprosy.

Drive out demons.

Why would he give them impossible tasks? Even as Sarah laughed to herself, did they do the same? Did they also laugh at God’s foolishness? Before they go, he gives them many instructions, and warnings. He paints a brutally honest picture of what they will encounter. You are going out as sheep among wolves…*to do impossible things.*

And we have no idea what they did, where they went, or if they were able to accomplish any of the things that Jesus told them to do. They seem to be gone for all of chapter 11, and come back hungry in chapter 12. Did Jesus expect them to accomplish anything? Did he expect them to heal the sick or raise the dead or cleanse those who have leprosy or drive out demons? Suzanne Guthrie, on her blog, At the Edge of the Enclosure, offers a perspective on this:

 “…suddenly I saw Jesus, like the Holy Spirit, conferring compassion upon the disciples and sending them out. Or, perhaps, sending them out, *so that compassion might challenge them,* widen, expand, break open, spill out, teach them how hardened or vulnerable they are. Teach them to what extent they fall short of love. Compassion offers an unending and plentiful harvest as love melts boundaries and prejudices.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Whenever I read what Jesus told his disciples to do – healing, raising the dead, restoring lepers, driving out demons – I skim over it. “That doesn’t apply to me,” I think to myself. “That’s for Jesus’ day, not for today,” I say to myself. I let myself off the hook. I chuckle over demons. And God says, “I heard you laugh!” “But I didn’t even laugh out loud,” I think to myself. “Doesn’t matter,” says God. “I know what your laugh sounds like. Don’t fall short of love”

And God says, “Get out there and learn some compassion. Get out there and be expanded, be broken open, listen to someone…if you don’t go, there is not even the possibility of a miracle.

Jesus sends *us* out to heal and liberate.

It’s hard to imagine a world in which we – non-medical professionals - heal the sick, especially in a time of pandemic.

It’s impossible to imagine a world in which we raise the dead: all those needlessly killed by police, all who have died from COVID-19, all the transgender individuals who have also been victims of prejudice-inspired violence. And on, and on.

It’s hard to imagine a world in which we cleanse those who have leprosy, the outcasts, the isolated, left to die alone.

It’s impossible to imagine a world in which we drive out demons, whatever that means, in all of its mystery.

It’s almost impossible to imagine those concrete things, but that’s okay, because I don’t think God really expects us to do them. That’s not where we need to focus our energy. Let’s take it to another level.

What if healing the sick, means exploring the illnesses within our souls? Those illnesses within us that contribute to the illnesses in our society? Speaking to white people: the discrimination, the oppression of people of color, the school to prison pipeline, the gerrymandering, the voter suppression, the threats to affordable healthcare, on and on and on.

What if raising the dead is the challenge to raise those dead places within ourselves, within our society? Those times we have shrugged our shoulders and said, ‘That’s just the way it is, I can’t change it!” We seem to have lost our compassion as we have tucked ourselves away within our safe circles of sameness.

What if cleansing the leper means seeking out the one who has been excluded, the one who has been rejected, the one we don’t want to see because they make us uncomfortable? What if cleansing the leper means exposing the contagious intolerant thinking around us? As we watch protections for health care for transgender individuals disappear, where has our compassion gone?

What if driving out demons, means just that…driving out the evils, the terrors, the fears that divide us? Beginning within ourselves. What if we sought to be cleansed of the prejudices and biases? What if we allowed the wounds to be healed so that they didn’t take root so deeply within us?

Jesus says: Tell them the realm of God is near.

Jesus says:

Heal the sick.

Raise the dead.

Cleanse those who have leprosy.

Drive out demons.

And so we pray:

Heal us, that we may be unafraid to show others our scars.

Raise us, that we may roll the stones that trap others in the grave.

Cleanse us, so that we walk out with compassion among the world.

Drive out our demons, so that others can know what it means to live free.

Walk into our chaos with the promise of laughter, God of life.

Walk into our chaos with justice and joy.

We pray in the name of the one who calls us in and sends us out. Amen.

1. Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4925>, The Laborers are Few. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Suzanne Guthrie, <http://edgeofenclosure.org/proper6a.html>, Harvest of Compassion [↑](#endnote-ref-2)