

2020 Genesis 21:1-7 New Revised Standard Version

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." ⁷And 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."

"GOD TRANSFORMS"

Genesis 21:6

It's been hard to laugh during these days. But since laughter is part of our reading today, we'll start with this. A husband and wife were on a long automobile trip when they got into a big argument over a small issue. The air was so icy; they could have turned off the air conditioner. For miles they refused to speak to each other. The silence continued until they drove past some donkeys grazing in a pasture. The husband finally broke the silence: "Are those some of your relatives?" His wife answered, "Yes, they're relatives of mine, and from your side of the family." They both started laughing, the tension dissolved, and the issue which caused the argument was quickly forgotten.

Laughter is God's gift to us. Let's not overlook the humor in some of Jesus' teaching. Something about a camel straining to get through the eye of a needle. Good humor lifts our spirits and draws us together. Laughter helps us to take ourselves less seriously. Humor has a transforming power.

These days highly skilled people are often hired as "agents of change." They are very well paid to transform an organization and make it more successful. This work can be difficult and painful and usually doesn't bring much laughter. Often the person who initiates this transformation is not well accepted; they may even be feared. Sometimes they accomplish transformation; sometimes not. For over fifty years many people have attempted to transform the Toronto Maple Leafs into Stanley Cup champions with no success.

The greatest agent of change, the one who does the most profound work of transformation is God. God transforms people. He transforms situations. Right now God is transforming us who believe into the image of his Son. God will yet transform his creation into the Kingdom of God. And God's transforming work is always for good. It's not to be feared. God transforms. The story from Genesis 17 and 21 reveals three aspects of God's transforming work.

First, God transforms promises into reality.

God once said to Abraham, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if you can. So shall your offspring be. You will be the father of a great nation." But years went by. No child was born to aging Abraham and Sarah. They even tried to fulfill God's promise on their own. Abraham fathered a son with his slave girl Hagar and named him Ishmael. A great nation would come through Ishmael, but he was not the child of promise.

One day the Lord appeared to Abraham in the form of three men. Abraham bowed before them and showed them great hospitality. They asked him, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" "Over there," Abraham said, "in the tent." One said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah overheard the promise and laughed. The Lord heard Sarah laugh and asked, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Then 21:7, "The LORD did for Sarah as he had promised...Sarah conceived and bore a son and Abraham gave him the name Isaac."

Imagine the snickers in the community. People greeted Sarah as she pushed the stroller along the sidewalk, "What a wonderful grandson you have." "Oh no," Sarah would reply proudly, "this is my own son, Isaac." When people got home they would roll their eyes and laugh, "Imagine – having a child at that age! Don't they have any sense?"

But against all expectation, God had transformed his promise into reality. When God makes a promise he fulfills it. Nothing is too wonderful for the Lord.

You see, promises are just words until they become reality. A politician may make many promises, but the promises are just empty words until legislation is passed and the new law or regulation is implemented. But God's promises are not empty words. God transforms his promises into reality.

God's greatest promise was to send one who would deliver us from the power of sin and death. Isaiah said of the promised One - "He was pierced for our

transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that brought us peace, and by his wounds we are healed.” God made his promise a reality by giving us his own Son, born to another unlikely couple, in an even more miraculous way. “In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son...conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” God is the great promise keeper. Remember the rainbow in the sky, the son born to an elderly couple, the virgin birth, the old rugged cross on a dark afternoon in Jerusalem, the empty tomb as dawn broke on Easter morning, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the new heaven and earth of Revelation. And promises that are still unfulfilled, like that last one, will yet be fulfilled at the right time, many of them when Christ returns. Indeed, God is fulfilling his promises in us and for us right now. “Whoever believes in Jesus has forgiveness of sins through his name...whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life...I will never fail you or forsake you...nothing in all creation can separate you from my love.” God transforms his promises into reality. And with the help of the Holy Spirit, we become promise-keepers, too.

Secondly, we see that God transforms bitterness into joy.

After Sarah heard the Lord’s promise, she laughed to herself, bitterly, no doubt. Abraham was a wealthy man, so Sarah was not in need. But she didn’t have the one thing she most desired, a child. In those days it was thought that if a woman had no children, God had closed her womb as punishment for some misdeed. But Sarah was no better or worse than any other woman, including those whose homes were full of children. Sarah didn’t get it. What had she done? Why was God against her? Why had her hopes been dashed? And when she heard the Lord’s promise she laughed out of the bitterness in her soul. “Right, sure.”

Well, it can happen to all of us. The years tick by and things don’t change. We lose hope and become bitter at life, even bitter with God. So it was with Sarah.

But then in spite of everything, Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son. Abraham named him Isaac which means “laughter.” And now Sarah laughed with joy. Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” God had transformed Sarah’s bitterness into joy.

God knows our disappointments and our dashed hopes, even the disappointment we often feel with ourselves. But God does not want our souls to be full of bitterness. Instead, God’s Holy Spirit works to transform bitter hearts into joyful hearts. God is doing it through his word of promise, through his actions on

our behalf, not only the big ones, but through the small mercies he extends to us daily. God turns our bitterness into joy through the living hope he gives us in Jesus.

Sometimes the deeper the disappointment, the greater the joy on the other side. Probably Sarah felt more joy over this one child than she might have over ten children. "God has brought laughter for me." God transformed Sarah's bitterness into joy. And he transformed Good Friday sorrow into great joy on Easter morning and beyond. "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

A man once told me that he had been bitter for years and angry with God because his father had died at a fairly young age of a devastating disease. But over the years God transformed his bitterness. Now he is comforted when he realizes that death relieved his father of further suffering and now he looks forward to seeing him again in heaven. And in God's eternal Kingdom we may understand why God allowed some temporary disappointments. Perhaps it was because he had a greater plan in mind. No doubt Sarah came to see how important she had been in God's plan of salvation, by giving birth to Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was the father of twelve sons. And so God's plan of salvation through Israel began to unfold. God transforms our bitterness into joy.

Finally, God transforms our unbelief into faith.

Sarah's first laugh was a bitter laugh; it was also an unbelieving laugh. She couldn't believe the Lord's promise. The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a son, now that I am old?'" But Sarah said, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. But the Lord said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." Sarah was afraid because she knew that disbelieving God's word is a serious thing.

But Sarah's unbelief didn't stop God from fulfilling his promise. Sarah said, "Who would have ever said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children. Yet I have borne him a son..." Now she knew that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. God transformed Sarah's unbelief into sure and joyful faith.

How and when God's transforming work happens is often mysterious. C.S. Lewis went on a trip to the zoo one day. He said that he set out as an unbeliever. By the time he got home that evening, he believed that Jesus is the Son of God. He never explained what the zoo had to do with it and probably didn't know. But somehow God got to him when his defenses were down. God transformed his unbelief into

a faith which not only nurtured C.S. Lewis for the rest of his life, but generations of Christians through his writings.

Yes, we may sometimes doubt God's word. But nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. And if you doubt or when you doubt, come to the empty tomb and let God transform your unbelief into faith. There you can say to the Risen Christ as Thomas did, "My Lord and my God." And on that day when God's redeemed people of every race come to heaven, I think we'll laugh out loud, not in unbelief, but with wonder and joy and praise. We will say, "Oh yes, it's all true, just as God said. Thanks be to God!"