

"What Questions Are You Asking?" - September 20, 2015

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Rev. Ruth Martz

Mark 9:30-37; Genesis 18:1-15; 21: 1-7

*Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. Rainer Maria Rilke (1903, in *Letters to a Young Poet*)*

When we read the gospels, we are always challenged by the questions that Jesus asks, especially when he answers a question with another question! In this morning's reading, Jesus was trying to warn his disciples that he would be betrayed and killed, a very painful and difficult thing to bring up. But the disciples didn't understand and were afraid to ask any questions. Instead, they started a dispute among themselves about who was the greatest. Later, Jesus asked: *What were you arguing about?* That's a very good question for us too. Would we remain silent and red-faced like the disciples?

I was struck by the number of questions in our reading from Genesis, revealing questions that surprise and provoke. The messengers of God ask three of the questions as they speak to Abraham—but really to Sarah who is overhearing the conversation. And Sarah asks two questions, as if speaking to herself, but she too is overhead.

It was a BIG deal in those days to be generous in one's hospitality and welcoming of strangers who came to your home, for they could be messengers of God. So we hear Abraham offer them a "little water" and a "little bread"--oh it's no bother! Then he rushes into the tent—Sarah, make gourmet cakes fast!-- runs to the herd, grabs the best calf, gives it to the servant who rushes to cook it. Abraham wants to impress and please his mystery guests! Finally, he sets all this delicious food before them, and he stands respectfully by, trying to catch his breath while they eat.

And here comes the first question: *Where is your wife, Sarah?*

What?? You've got to be kidding me!

This is certainly no ordinary visit; these men must be from God because who else would care about the woman whose place is in the tent?? They know where Sarah is, so why ask the question? To get her attention? To let Abraham know that it's not always about him?

Sarah is listening from the door of the tent, perhaps when she hears her name. So when one stranger proclaims that she will give birth to a son, she lets out an incredulous GUFFAW.

Now, let me back up a bit to remind you that Abraham was 75 years old when God first called him and promised him many descendants. And in the chapter before today's reading, God renewed this promise to Abraham at age 99. And guess how Abraham responded? He "*fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"*"

Abraham's laughter is different from Sarah's, because he does have one son, Ishmael, whose mother is Hagar, Sarah's maid. Abraham knows that Ishmael can carry on the family line. But I hear bitterness and even scorn in Sarah's laughter, for she has suffered the loss of her deepest hope and purpose. She has suffered as a barren woman who was pitied and disdained in this culture, although perhaps not openly because of her husband's importance.

But to hear this promise of a son from a bunch of strangers—even if they are God's messengers—is like a slap in the face for Sarah.

Speaking to herself, she ridicules this promise. *After I have grown old—and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?* Is she taking a jab at both Abraham and God?

Of course, no one was supposed to overhear what Sarah blurted out---but (sigh) God hears everything!

It's strange and humorous that one man then asks Abraham: *Why did Sarah laugh and say she's too old to have a child?* Well, that's not exactly what she said, but.... I can see Abraham's face turning bright red: *Why are you asking me? I haven't a clue!* Of course, these messengers already know why Sarah laughed like that, so why ask? To provoke Sarah to respond and confess her lack of faith?

Then comes the question of all questions---

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

And we all shout---NO! Then we go home and ponder that question and that answer. Have we given up hope for something or someone? Have we stopped telling God our deepest yearnings and dreams? Do we pray for things that we think are impossible?

Well, Sarah does what most of us do when we've said something awful that nobody was supposed to hear, and certainly not God! NO, I DID NOT LAUGH. She's terrified that it is really God who's right there confronting her.

I'm sure that you've heard or said at least once that God has a sense of humor.

Oh yes, Sarah, you did laugh! The God of love and mercy speaks to her face to face. Sarah, I know your pain, I know the bitterness of your laugh, and I am here now FOR YOU. Don't be afraid.

And then comes the fulfillment of God's promise.

Then bursts out the most joyous laughter from Sarah: *God has brought laughter for me, and everyone who hears will laugh with me.*

And we all laugh and rejoice with her: "Hallelujah!" "Praise God!" Thank you, Jesus!

The name of her son, Isaac, means: "he laughs."

Unable to contain herself, Sarah speaks the final question: *Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?* NO ONE!

Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.

WOW. A woman whose hope has been fulfilled after 24 years of continual disappointment. A woman whose emptiness has been filled with new life. Someone whose faith has been renewed, whose praise for God has been restored, whose bitter laughter has been transformed into inexpressible joy and gratitude.

We all have stories like this, don't we? Stories filled with disappointment and renewed hope, with sorrow and unexpected laughter, with joy that does come in the morning. Stories filled with wonderful questions about faith and love, about kin and friends and strange messengers of God.

Where is your wife, Sarah? Who is missing today among us
Where are those people whose suffering we don't see--or don't want to see?

Shall I have pleasure? Shall I feel joy again?
Do you know why she's laughing so bitterly? Or is that your laughter?

Is anything too wonderful for God?

Who would have ever imagined that something so amazing could happen?

What are your questions? *Try to love the questions themselves. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*

Nothing is too wonderful for God. With God, all things are possible.
Hallelujah! Amen.