

If you have spent any time in Florida in the summer, you know the joy of an afternoon thunderstorm. It had been 98 degrees since daybreak, and almost nothing, not even sunset, was going to change that. Except of course, if the sky darkened and the wind blew and the thunder clapped. All of the sudden it becomes 76 degrees, and at least for an hour or so, you escape the afternoon heat.

With summer here, with prayers for sunshine and warmth, and with plans to escape the heat, we might relate to the story of Abraham and Sarah in our reading from Genesis this morning. The Bible says specifically that it was hot, that it was so hot Abraham was sitting in the shade of an old oak tree, trying to beat the heat. This is a story of summer, a story of how God showed up in the heat of the day to remind Abraham and Sarah that the promises God made were still on their way.

But all of that must have sounded like a heat-inflicted delusion, to follow the metaphor, the idea that they would have children. Sarah was 88 and Abraham was 99, and even if you account for rounding errors and how

they measured years differently back then, you are still left with a hot afternoon and the unlikely promise that she would conceive. In fact, Genesis says that Sarah laughed out loud when she heard God's message. Later she was embarrassed that she had laughed. She said that she didn't, but everyone remembered that she did. *Maybe*, they might have said, *maybe the heat got to her*.

In fairness, everyone should have understood why Sarah laughed. She and Abraham had been together a long time: married, wandering, journeying with this mysterious God who kept making giant promises that sounded like the peal of thunder on a summer's afternoon, but that often seemed to fizzle out without changing the temperature of their lives enough. She could remember back, I suspect, to when they were just normal people, living a normal life. They were Abram and Sarai back then before God found them and changed their names. There was no need then to correct friends and family when they got the names wrong. She must have felt like a little girl named Maggie who goes on to do great things and insists that people call her Margaret,

but people still remember the little girl and laugh when she says, *it's Margaret*.

And there was the meaning behind the names, Abraham and Sarah. Abraham meant father of many, and Sarah meant queen, because God would make his descendents prolific, and she would be their mother. But as far as she could tell, they had changed their names and asked people to call them “Father of Nations” and “Queen Mum,” all the while nothing had changed. She knew people went home and talked about how they had a manservant, Eliezar, and a handmaid, Hagar, and a handmaid’s son, Ishmael, but not really anyone of their own. I think she probably resented how she had to keep correcting people, *it's Abraham and Sarah now*, but she knew they went home and laughed at them and made jokes about the Queen with no subjects in her kingdom.

All of that changed in the heat of the summer when the Lord showed up—like a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder— and finally made good on the promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a son. God was in the

heat of the day, in the blazing heat and burning sun. Even though they hid from it in cooler places, there was nowhere they could go that God could not find them and be with them and transform life wherever they were. I pray that will be true for us, whatever cool and breezy places we find this summer, that God will show up like an afternoon thunderstorm in Florida or gentle Cape Cod breeze, that God will transform us, like God did for Sarah and Abraham, and continue shaping us to live and love and serve as the people God made us to be.

On another level, this story about Abraham and Sarah is one that chronicles the ongoing struggle between divine possibilities and human doubt. In the larger narrative, God is the one who shows up, making promises that seem larger than life, never giving up on them, returning again and again until they are fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah, for their part, exhibit a healthy dose of human doubt in this story. Old Testament theologian Walter Bruggemann calls it the “yes, but” of their story. In the face of divine promise and imagination, they say things like, “yes, but.” *Yes, but I have gotten to be quite old. Yes,*

*but it has ceased to be with me in the way it is for women. Yes, but we have heard this before. We left our homes and changed our names and hoped impossible things all because of this wonderful divine imagination. Yes, but...* Sarah says as she laughs. I suspect we can sympathize.

The other side of that is of course the divine, “yes but.” The divine “yes but” shows up in situations that we assume are too hopeless, and like a thunderstorm on a hot afternoon, completely change the dynamics of life. The holy, “yes but,” is captured in our reading in the simple words, “is anything too good for the Lord?” In Christian parlance, it is the reminder that grace comes unbidden, and that resurrection only comes in the places that seem the most dead and helpless.

But there is a way, it seems to me, that a life of faith expects us to move beyond the limiting of doubt in order to participate intentionally in sharing divine possibilities, in mimicking the holy “yes, but” of faith. The divine “yes, but” sees life not just as it is, but, through grace, as God can make it to be. And

participating intentionally in the divine “yes but” is part of the way in which God’s transformation works more and more in us, how we become the likeness of Christ and learn to be his people in the world. It understands how divine presence comes unexpectedly, sometimes like a thunderstorm in the heat of the afternoon, and it tells us that it is time to get up on our feet and do something.

Abraham was resting in the shade when God showed up, but he knew when it was time for him to do something. He called for water and he called for bread. He welcomed his guests. His participation in the divine “yes but” created a place for God to come and dwell and make good on the promise of descendents.

I noticed in this story, as you might also have noticed, that the two key elements in Abraham’s reaction were water and bread. I suppose that could be explained by ancient hospitality, but it made me think of baptism and Eucharist, the two foundations of Christian worship. In them, of course, is something that relies completely on

the work of God, that we cannot shape or make. But there is also a paradox, that our participation in them helps to shape the ways of God coming in us.

Listen to a few ways I imagine the “yes, but” of God to sound in this place.

Our children grow up in a world that is dangerous and devious. Yes, but, here they have learned the words of the gospel. Here they were sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.

There is so much sadness in the world, so much violence, so much need. Yes, but we continue, as we say at baptism, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

There is so much wrong with us! Yes but that’s why we’re here. It is not the well who need a doctor, after all, but the sick.

There is so much wrong with the world. Yes, but, that is why we are God’s people. That is why God sends us out to be Christ’s hands and feet.

Each Sunday, as we worship and prepare for Eucharist, there are some wonderful “yes, but” moments along the way. One is the Confession. In it, the disappointments and wrongdoing of our lives are met with the “yes, but” of divine forgiveness and mercy. Another is the Passing of the Peace. In it the pain of broken relationships and fear of demonstrating love is met by the right hand of fellowship, the “yes, but” that is unafraid to reach out in love. Another is in the offering of the bread and wine and the collection plates. Our lives are defined by what we have and what we achieve. Yes, but in that moment our actions mimic the words of our gospel today: *freely you have received, freely you should give.*

One of the last liturgical movements is the lavabo, when I was my hands right before Communion. It is the last thing we do before the Eucharistic Prayer. And it has become for me the moment in which I have to leave

behind whatever might be weighing on me if I am going to be completely present at the altar. You might want to think of it that way, too. There is so much that weighs on our hearts and minds. But when the time comes, another word of grace is spoken. “Yes, but,” for a moment, you can leave that all behind.

I noticed that Sarah got the last word in our reading this morning. She says that God brought laughter for her. She means that literally: Isaac’s name means laughter. But I suspect she never forgot the hot afternoon when she laughed at God. Like the rain on a hot summer day, God broke in and blessed Abraham and Sarah in ways they could only have imagined. I suspect she never laughed the same way again. Every time it got hot, every time she watched Isaac smile at her, human doubt gave way to divine possibilities. She must have smiled and she must have laughed at all that God helped her to leave behind. Perhaps she even channeled her own offspring, a descendent of Abraham and of her, who would be born so many generations later, who taught us

the depth of divine possibilities. *Freely*, her offspring said, *freely you have received; freely you should give.*