

This is a story that would create raised eyebrows and snickering in the neighborhood. Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and Sarah was ninety. There is nothing unusual about being that old. A lot of people reach their nineties. We have nine members over ninety years of age in our own church, and our own Helen Weber turned one-hundred just a few weeks ago. But in this story, this elderly couple is having a baby. Not adopting one. Bearing one. Abraham and Sarah probably heard some snickering whenever they were out in public. Abraham's friends might have even made some inappropriate comments. Abraham and Sarah may have been too embarrassed to go out in public. In the next chapter, when God further explained God's promise, and Sarah overheard that she was going to bear a son in her old age she laughed. When this son, Isaac, is born, Sarah declared, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." God brought laughter for Sarah, and everyone laughed not at her, but with her.

It was laughter for God did the impossible. God's promise sure was a surprise to them. Sarah had been barren. She had not born any children. They practiced the common fertility treatment of that day. Abraham fathered a son for them through his concubine Hagar, who bears the son Ishmael. God made it clear to Abraham and Sarah that Ishmael was not the fulfillment of God's promise that they would have a son.

In spite of her age, this pregnancy could very well have given Sarah a renewed sense of wholeness. It brought her laughter. Today many couples suffer disappointment, lost hope, when they are childless. Barrenness is a constant source of pain and inadequacy. Today, fertility treatments give some hope, but that does not

always work. Couples can spend thousands, if not tens of thousands of dollars trying to have a child, with no guarantee. In Sarah's day, the blame for infertility was placed on the woman. Barrenness was the woman's fault. It was the woman who bore the brunt of disappointment and hopelessness. Bearing a son, as God promised, brought her a renewed sense of wholeness. It brought her laughter.

When we are talking about amazing things God does, we are not talking about the kind of amazing things some pastors preach. We are not talking about how God can make you rich. We are not talking about how God will make it happen for you if you think it is possible, or you think positively. We are not talking about a God who will make your dreams come true. God is not about personal fulfillment, getting what we want. Rather, God desires that all of God's people live with wholeness, that all of God's people be able to laugh.

The message of these prosperity preachers, miss, neglect, is that the impossible God does is done for the world. God will make Abraham and Sarah ancestors of a nation, Israel. "All the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring." Abraham's offspring, the nation of Israel, will be a blessing to the entire world. God will do amazing things through God's community. Yes, he did an amazing thing for Abraham and Sarah by bringing an end to their barrenness. The end of Sarah's barrenness brought wholeness. This enables them to be the ancestors of a nation, a nation that will be a blessing to the whole world. Abraham and Sarah are agents of the amazing things God will do. God can do amazing things.

There is a story you may know, of a person able to bring about an amazing communal effort. It is the story of stone soup. Many of you probably know it. It is told in

many languages and many cultures. In the Portuguese tradition, a wandering monk, with an empty pot and a ladle in his knapsack, makes his way through a village, asking townspeople for something to eat, a crust of bread or scraps from their tables. Time after time he is ignored or sent away empty-handed.

In response, the monk announces to the townspeople that that evening he will host a feast and serve the most amazing of meals, stone soup. Curiously, the townspeople slowly gather at dusk as the monk starts a fire, places his pot on it, and fills it with water. Then, from his bag he takes a stone and carefully drops it into the simmering kettle. After stirring for a time, he takes a sip and declares it quite good, but not quite ready. "Why not?" the curious villagers ask. "Because it needs a pinch of salt and pepper and I seem to have none left in my bag." One of the townspeople runs to his home and returns with salt and pepper, which is tossed into the boiling pot with its solitary stone. After tasting again, the monk tilts his head in contemplation. "You know what would make this stone soup even more delicious? Sliced onions!" Another townspeople runs off and returns with sliced onions, excitedly splashed into the pot. The routine repeats itself again and again, with people adding carrots, slices of beef, garlic, potatoes, and so on, until the pot is filled to the brim with a feast and the people licking their lips with anticipation. A large table is set in the town square and spoons and bowls laid out. One by one the townspeople's bowls are filled by the monk, and together they sit and enjoy an evening of warm laughter and camaraderie over a meal of amazing stone soup. The monk's empty pot is filled by the townspeople, by the community.

Paul Rock, a Presbyterian pastor, suggests that empty pots are an opportunity for God to work. Sarah's barrenness was Abraham and Sarah's empty pot. What is our

empty pot? Is it the church? By church I am referring to Heritage Church, the Presbyterian Church, the church across our nation. The church is empty of people and resources. There could very well be people out there, even people in the church, who are laughing at us for thinking the church has a future. People who think we may be fools. Face the reality! Our mission is not to get the world to laugh at us, but to get the world to laugh.

One pastor tells of eating in a restaurant with another couple. There were some high-school students in a corner booth. The students got tickled about something and started laughing. Their laughter got louder and louder. Soon they became aware that some people were listening to their laughter, and they tried to stop. However, the more they tried to stop laughing, the more the giggles and laughter convulsed their entire bodies. The laughter moved out from that one booth to another. People started to smile, and then they, too, began to laugh. Then the pastor said, "I saw it coming toward us! Soon we found ourselves caught up in the whole atmosphere of laughter and joy. We didn't even know what we were laughing about. But our conversation was interrupted as we smiled at each other and then broke out in laughter. It was an amazing moment." Our mission is to get the world to laugh with us.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ
we bend our knees and lift up our hearts,
giving glory to God forever. **Amen.**