Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost Church of the Transfiguration

Rev David Howells 2107.06.18

The long haul. And Sarah laughed.

The tents of a nomadic herder are pitched. There is good grazing here. There are a few trees for shelter. Three men wander towards the camp and the old man waves them over to be welcomed. Out in the wilds the rule is to look after strangers. You may need to be looked after one day too. So he honours them and sits them down in the shade beneath a tree and gets the team together to make a meal. There is a sense that the stranger is always a little sacred. Who knows what they bring?

Sarah, the herder’s old wife, as is right in the presence of strangers, tucks herself away in the tent, but close to a gap so that she can hear and peak out. She’s not sure if there are three of them or just one. It’s oddly hard to tell. Then, she feels like she’s been seen when one of them talks about her. He says she’ll be pregnant and she blows her cover with a guffaw. Sarah is about 95 or so. “Pregnant! I don’t think so buddy!” It felt like the Lord speaking to her now through the voice of one of the men. “Why did you laugh? Don’t you believe I can do this with you” “No, I didn’t laugh.” she says, like a child caught with a mouth covered in chocolate, “It wasn’t me!” And the Lord replies, “Oh yes it was you. You did laugh.”

I remember, with a vividness of the first experience, climbing a “mountain” in the Lake District of England. Lucy and I were in our early 20’s, young and foolish. On vacation and in beautiful countryside we decided to go up Scafell Pike because it was near a car park. In shorts and sandals we set off. (How often do we undertake projects with little comprehension of how big they are?)

It didn’t look too high from the car park. So off we went up the well-trodden path. This particular mountain, not unlike other hard pieces of work, had a deceptive quality to it. Looking up you could see the sky as the steep slope above you crested. “Ah ha! The top is in sight!” we said. About 25 times! The mountain was arranged in folds. I can remember sitting by a cold tarn, after about an hour of climbing, drinking the water in my hand, thinking, “I cannot do this. It’s too hard!” But we went on. People wearing big boots, sensible clothing and carrying backpacks looked at us with anxiety as we went up and they came down. It was too late to give up. Eventually the ridge above us actually was the summit. We had climbed about 800m. Laid out below us was a vista of mountains, hills, lakes, villages and ribbons of roads. Above us nothing but sky woven with threads of cloud and scatterings of birds in flight. It was transcendent, wonderful, beyond belief. We sat there in silence, awed. We had grins on our faces that would not come off for the rest of the day. Laughter was really the only appropriate response!

Reading today’s Gospel I found myself feeling worried for the disciples. Jesus sends them off with no equipment, no cell phone nor pre-paid visa card. All they have to offer is peace, healing, words of hope and challenge. They are to be beggars. They are told to expect the worst. Jesus says to them that they cannot prepare in advance, but trust that it will work out. What they need will be given to them at the moment they need it.

Paul says the same to new disciples in the early church. “All that you need is to know that you are at peace with God. The rest is just details. It will be a hard climb, and you will want to give up, and people will try and stop you, but don’t fret. God’s grace will supply you, and the hope of glory will get you through.”

I have watched Lucy, my wife, go through pregnancy and birth 3 times. She was a young woman. I cannot imagine how frightening being pregnant at 90 plus would be. I think it must have been terrifying for both Sarah and Abraham. It is in hindsight, after the birth, as she nurses her astonishing son, that Sarah says, “God has brought laughter for me. And everyone who hears about it will laugh with me” Radiant, amazed joy, and laughter.

Do not turn away from the path that looks hard.

Do not wait for all the problems to be solved before you set off.

Do not run from the darkness, but walk towards the dawn in hope.

Do not turn back on a hope, on a promise, on a decision made on faith.

When you laugh, in sheer disbelief, at what lies before you, keep going and laugh for joy that the good news has come true.

The path of the Way of Christ rises in folds of land. There are places to rest and water to drink, and a community that walks this foolish path with you, and you will think, “Why bother?” But at the top there is something that only the laughter of delight can articulate.

It is fulfillment

It is the summit

It is the Kingdom of Heaven.