

OUR JOURNEY WITH GOD
Genesis 18: 1-15 and Matthew 9: 35-10:8
June 14, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

“If I had only known...,” said Traci Jennings, single mother of two boys and a survivor of the 2007 Greensburg, Kansas tornado. “If I had only known, I would have gathered up my pictures and not my cell phone!”

Photographs. Most of us have them, and in our time, most of us have them on our cell phones. But she did not. I find myself, often, right before I fall asleep sneaking a peak at a photo or video. They capture, for me, a moment in time that I can live again and again. But, also during this pandemic, I found myself re-organizing closets, and in particular one where we keep all the old-fashioned photo albums and scrapbooks. Of course, it sparked a jog down memory lane. It is amazing how an otherwise blah picture can be enhanced with a little colorful border or other scrapbooking techniques. They can make history appear a little better than it actually was. The organizing frenzy stopped when I came across the “to do” boxes filled with “yet to be” separated and categorized photos. Looking at one picture though reminded me why some of these might still be in a box. Not all pictures bring joy to our hearts. Some remind us of a messy time in life, hidden hurts or things left undone. We have pitched them into that “to do” container because we do not want to deal with the past or we are just too busy with the present to worry about organizing our past.

But truth be told, there are time in all our lives when we have the desire or need to revisit our history. We long to see how the dreams of days gone by fared as we have moved forward into the future.

"Looking back," Traci said in an interview with CNN, "that Friday was actually a wonderful day." She talks about stopping by the nursery to get geraniums to plant, cooking dinner, and for them, like most Fridays, putting on their pajamas, popping popcorn and watching movies. At

some point her mother called, telling her to turn on the news channel. She turned on the radio, but they kept watching the movie. Then, the wind came. The hail started. Typical Kansas weather she would later tell the reporter; part of who we are. Eventually she decided it was time for clothes, shoes, blankets, and flashlights. The sirens sounded. “Sending the boys on to the bathroom, I did something stupid,” she says. “After spending \$60 on geraniums, the wind was not going to get them!”

Once outside, she realized this was no ordinary storm. She goes on to say: *It was as if the breath was being sucked out of my body. I grabbed the plants, my cell phone, and some extra money. I pulled the futon mattress into the bathroom, told the boys to hang on to the base of the commode and covered us. The wind was blowing so hard I could not open my eyes, but I knew that we were fully exposed. The mattress was gone and from the feel of the wind on all sides, the roof must have been lifted, too. We prayed for what seemed an eternity, we stayed wrapped around the commode and each other; I kept thinking it would come back. In reality, we were there about twenty minutes. People, like zombies began milling around the streets, flashlights with eerie light shining on things that we no longer recognized. Landmarks gone. Eventually, I heard my mother's voice; my parents and grandmother were fine. It is a picture I will never forget!*

In photographs, as in stories, we look for the connection to something in our past that helps us make sense of our present, and that might also shed a little light on our future. Cue up the image of a child holding a toy stethoscope, resting on a toy animal, then a lump of memory swells in our throats, even as our hearts swell with joy, seeing that child, now grown, with D.V.M. signed after his or her name.

Sometimes we immerse ourselves in the images of “back thens and do you remember whens” and we snicker at what we used to wear, shutter at what we used to do and hopefully celebrate who we have become. And, it is by faith, that we have become family, God’s family connected to one another through the aged Abraham and the surprised Sarah. Their

spiritual blood runs through us and a whole cast of characters (and truly some were characters...LOL), and then situated in the big middle of the family of faith photo is God!

Every time we open the Bible, this Living Word of God, we open our family album and we discover a little more about who we are and “why” we are who we are. We learn that our ancestors of old had questions about life, and life in community, just as we have today. Where do we turn for help? Can we survive when all seems lost? Am I loved? By whom? Why? What happens when there are no more family photos in the album or wonderful possibilities for life run dry?

Sometimes our ancestors announced that they were going in search of answers on their own. The witness of scripture tells us that answers and truth they were seeking always led them back to the One whose picture always appears at the center of the family of faith album...God. It leads us back to the One who laughs with love at our human limitations and says, “Oh child, I am here! With me, nothing is impossible!” So today, we open up the family album and take a sneak peek into our faith family history, trusting that if we have forgotten that our God is a God of possibilities, the snapshot of Sarah’s and Abraham’s lives will remind us.

There he sits, Old Abraham, somewhat shaded from the sun by the tent and trees. But it is hot! He thinks he sees something or someone, wiping the sweat from his forehead thinking that perhaps it is a mirage. He blinks and the images are still there. The images are real. Abraham and Sarah have guests. Abraham springs up, OK he is 100, he does not quite spring, but he makes his way to his feet and greets his visitors. But this is more than a “meet and greet.” Old Abram is about the business of sacred obligation; he is showing hospitality to strangers located somewhere between here, there, and nowhere. They are in the desert and the difference between life and death could mean a drink of water, a bite of bread. Abraham practices the age-old ritual of hospitality by

washing and cooling the feet of these men. Together, he and Sarah eventually offer them the necessities of life. Food. Drink.

But before that, we see soon-to-be surprised Sarah peeping through the fold in the tent, straining to hear what the men are saying, anxious to get the griddle fired up. She catches just enough of the conversation that she laughs and goes about her business.

Something is happening with Abraham. At 75 God had promised a child to him and Sarah. Seeing as how they are now 100 and 90, respectively, God is a little slow on the uptake. Surely nature would have the final say. So, Abraham seems settled, resolved to finally staying put, packing away the possibilities.

It is not the Abraham we are used to seeing. The family faith photo album, full of pictures of our great grandfather times many greats, is always journeying. One photo has him in Haran. Others reveal him camping in Canaan; bedded down in Bethel; enjoying himself in Egypt. Today, at 100 and 90, they are content to simply have a tent. How much more blowing and going do **they** really want to do?

But that is not the question of this text. At the center of all of Abraham's and Sarah's traveling and tent-raising, is God. This promise-filled path that they have been following is not about their journey only, it is about God's journey with them. And the picture is still about God's journey with us. How many more paths and promises does God have for us and, are we willing to follow by faith, no matter our age or stage of life?

We do not have to be 90 or 100 to feel like life's possibilities are fading from the photo. A decision we made long ago...about a partner, a career, a place to call home has not turned out to be the pretty picture you envisioned. Disease knocked on the door. An out-of-control economy ate away our earnings. We find ourselves daily going through the motions; existing, but empty. So, it goes you say! Like Abraham and Sarah, have we grown content with what God has done in our lives, not

expecting anything new or transforming? God has been good to us and we have lived good lives. Occasionally we pick up the family album. It looks the same, reads the same. No surprises. If we want to sit in the shade enjoy what has been, then let others laugh. But, if we take a cue from our family faith history, we better be prepared to hear, “Is there anything to impossible for the Lord?” At any age! Sarah laughed and look what happened.

God shows up in the picture again looking just like one of the guys and Abraham’s and Sarah’s traveling days are not over! The God of promises and possibilities is full of surprises. The possibilities of blessing upon blessing are just beginning; the family album is far from full.

Jesus says to us, members of this family of faith, we still have loads of photographs to take. Jesus says to us, the fields are full of people who do not see God standing next to them in this picture we call life. Some are seeking hospitality; others come with need. Our commission is to share with them all the hilarious possibilities and blessings that God, through the life of Jesus Christ, has for them. We are to be life-giving water and sustaining-bread to strengthen them for their faith journey.

And, if along the way, your own path seems to dead end in doubt, or if you have become content, believing that, journeying with God has been good, but nothing different lies ahead, then open up THIS family album, God holy word call the Bible.

Take a look at what they used to wear and say and do. And laugh; it is OK. Sarah did, then denied it. God said, "Oh, yes you did laugh, and the rest is our history. Sarah went into labor and birthed God's blessing for generations to come. So great the number, that Jesus says to us, no matter our age or stage of life, it takes hard work and much labor to gather the family faith photos.

And that, Jesus says, is our present. When we get tired and the work of harvesting seems overwhelming, the God of our past, present, and future, walks and works right alongside us.

Traci Jennings believes this. *If I had only known, I would have gathered up my pictures.* As the interview was drawing to a close, Traci showed photographs of what used to be her home. The only thing left was the commode. There was no structure. Furnishings and parts of the foundation had been pulled apart and scattered. The reporter with tears said, "You were blessed." Traci smiled and said, "Yes. But more than that, we experienced first-hand the God of possibilities. Why others died, I cannot answer. But, from this day on, I do believe that nothing is impossible for God."

If we ever begin to doubt that, then we do as Sarah did. Laugh and watch as the One who masters all impossibilities, makes all things possible. This promise-filled path that we have been following is not about our journey only, it is about God's journey with us. Amen