

Much of life is spent waiting; waiting to turn 16 or 21, waiting to get married, to find a job, to save enough money to buy a home, to have children, for the children to grow up, for grandchildren, for retirement. Waiting to die. And there are other kinds of waiting. Waiting in line in the grocery store, for the computer to speed up or just to work. Waiting for a long-expected phone call or response to an email. Eventually, most things come to us, sometimes anticlimactic and even disappointing and sometimes filled with excitement that overwhelms all our expectations.

There is a different kind of waiting. It is what people in the bible might have called, “waiting for God.” One can relate to the answer God gives to Habbakuk’s complaints, “It is tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come.” Every now and again, and by no means only once in a lifetime, we are overwhelmed, we do experience something greater and more full of meaning than at other times. Often, our waiting for God is associated with some long-awaited hope that has passed improbability into impossibility. It often takes us by surprise. The story of Sarah and Abraham is a case in point.

Sarah and Abraham

The story is told in the book of Genesis beginning in chapter 12. A man from Iraq named Abraham was given a message from God. If he would leave his

home, then God would bless him by making him the father of a great nation that would be a blessing to the whole world. Later, the promise was clarified when he told that his descendants will be like the stars of the heavens or the sands of the seashore. So he took his wife Sarah and some relatives left. The only drawback was that he didn’t have any children, for his wife had been unable to conceive.

The years of waiting went by and Sarah passed beyond the childbearing years. In their disappointment Sarah and Abraham did something that was not of faith but of unbelief. She gave Abraham one of her servant girls who bore a child for her. More time passed. They had left everything and received nothing in return. They had passed beyond hope. That is the setting of this story.

Buechner

I have mentioned before the Christian author Frederick Buechner as one of my favorites. I must give a general footnote to him now because the Abraham and Sarah story sets up a prominent theme in his writings and many years ago I read it and was moved. I can’t take credit for the ideas I share.

As a matter of fact, let me read from Telling the Truth, a book about preaching the gospel in which Buechner’s take on this story is presented. Keep in mind the tragic nature of our waiting and let yourself be caught up in the waiting of our times:

The waiting for racial reconciliation
The waiting for the elimination of poverty
The waiting for peace
And even on a personal note, the waiting for the sadness in our lives to be turned into joy.

The Reading

The place to start is with a woman laughing. She is an old woman, and, after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and rutted like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts shake. She squinnies her eyes shut, and her laughter is all China teeth and wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing ninety-one hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby. Even though it was an angel who told her she can't control herself, and her husband can't control himself either. He keeps a straight face longer than she does, but he ends by cracking up too. Even the angel is not unaffected. He hides his mouth behind his golden scapular, but you can still see his eyes. They are larkspur blue and brimming with something of which the laughter of the old woman and her husband is at best only a rough translation.

The old woman's name is Sarah, of course, and the old man's name is Abraham, and they are laughing at the idea of a baby's being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare's picking up the tab. They are laughing because the angel not only seems to believe it but seems to expect them to believe it too. They are

laughing because with part of themselves they do believe it. They are laughing because with another part of themselves they know it would take a fool to believe it. They are laughing because laughing is better than crying and maybe not even all that different. They are laughing because if by some crazy chance it should just happen to come true, they they would really have something to laugh about. They are laughing at God and with God, and they are laughing at themselves too because laughter has that in common with weeping. No matter what the immediate occasion is of either your laughter or your tears, the object of both ends up being yourself and your own life.

The Moment of Grace

The message of the bible is the discovery of the moment of grace, as the psalmist puts it, grace that is ever-present but we experience it more intensely at certain times than others just like Sarah experienced it more intensely when the messenger came to tell her about the son to whom she was to old to give birth. And the discovery is not only one of great mystery and wonder, but also of great joy, so much that her laughter points beyond itself to the gospel message. It is too good to be true. It is beyond belief. The laughter that it generates may start out ironic and sarcastic but deepens and reaches the depths of the soul with a joy so powerful that it blots out all the pain.

Sarah laughs and so do we, with a delight that is beyond words until finally there is a change, the irony and sadness fade and are replaced with authentic faith so real that when the child is born she names him Isaac, which means, laughter, because as she confesses later, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

The grace of God was always there, but *this* was her time.

Our Time

And each of us has a time too. There doesn't have to be times of wonder and amazement, times that take the breath away with beauty and joy, but there is. Given the sadness of the world these times often catch us by surprise and if we are not paying attention we miss them. If that happens we have no one but ourselves to blame. Keep your eyes open for them. Be forewarned, if you keep your eyes open you will see everything including the painful things. But your moment of grace will surely come when the waiting stops and the laughter begins. Buechner goes on:

Then a strange and unexpected sound is heard. It is like the creaking of a rusty things. It is like ice cracking up in a pond in March. It is like the sound of hens cackling, of the old Ford trying to turn over on a winter morning. It is the sound of laughter, of an old woman and an old man knocking themselves out in a tent. It starts out dry and small and ends so

uproarious and big that to preserve his dignity even the angel has to turn his face aside.

Before we ask any questions about it, we should first just listen to it. It starts with a startled catch of the breath because the last thing either of them expected to do was laugh, and it takes them by surprise as much as it takes us. It well up in their throats like sorrow, only it is not sorrow, and contorts their old faces like tears, only that's not what it is either, or at least a different kind of tears. Their shoulders shake. Their faces go red. Their China teeth slip a notch. She will be ninety-one on her next birthday, and the angel says she will celebrate it in the maternity ward. Sarah stuffs her apron to her mouth. Abraham gasps for air.

These kinds of moments also happen in our lives. You may experience it as a healing or a rescue from danger or a forgiveness of guilt or a discovery of purpose or a removal of fear but you will know the moment of grace when it comes. And it may come after many failures of faith, just like it did for Sarah and Abraham, but it will come nonetheless, because it does not depend upon us and our readiness, but only on the grace of God. When it comes we can join in the refrain with David in the 23rd Psalm;

"Surely goodness and mercy will accompany me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever. Amen.

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