

On the Threshold
Genesis 18:1-15
June 15, 2008

Most of us take doorways for granted – unless there is an earthquake and we are looking for a protected place to stand! We simply walk through a door to get into the place we're headed. But if we pause for slow motion, we can see how walking through a doorway is a passage, a transition from one room to another, a movement from one state of being to the next. Life is full of thresholds, both literal places of entry and metaphoric transitions in life.

Today we are reminded of various passages in the journey of life. Fathers reflect on that day when a warm cuddly bundle of joy and responsibility was placed in their arms – the miracle of new life. The ministry of parenting is both an awesome privilege and a great responsibility. Parents not only provide for emotional, spiritual, and physical needs. They also have the opportunity to shape the values of their children's lives and to model trustworthy citizenship. When they step through the threshold of parenting, fathers and mothers embark upon one of the most significant experiences of a lifetime.

They will then watch their children walk through many doorways – into preschool, kindergarten, middle school, high school. Parenting is not finished upon graduation, for adulthood holds its own thresholds of many kinds: employment, higher education, relationships, opportunities, homes.

The graduates whom we celebrate stand on a threshold, leaving behind the familiarity of high school or college, and moving forward into a world full of opportunity and uncertainty. Many have charted an initial course – a job, a college education, travel, service – but they embark upon a journey which will hold a multitude of doorways for them.

This morning we find Abraham and Sarah at similar doorways in their lives. Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent one day, the hot desert sun bearing down upon him. Suddenly guests appeared at his home. Abraham ran from the threshold of his tent to greet his guests and welcome them to his home. Together with Sarah they offered the warm hospitality of footwashing and food typical of their culture.

While the guests ate, Sarah listened to their conversation while standing at the tent entrance. These guests were not simply nomads wandering through the desert on their way to the next town. These guests were messengers of God who came bearing good news to Abraham and Sarah. "The promise of God that Sarah would have a son will soon be fulfilled," was the good news brought by the angels. Ordinarily this would have been fantastic news for Sarah to hear, for she had longed for a child for many years. However, at this time in her life this birth announcement hit her as absurd. Sarah laughed at the news. You see, Sarah was withered and old, long past her childbearing years. She could not conceive of bearing a child at this time. The angel was about sixty years too late for this eighty-year old woman! Standing at the threshold of her tent, hearing the announcement of an impending birth, Sarah laughed.

It may have been a nervous laugh, tinged with anxiety at the uncertain future this news meant. A child would bring significant change to the life to which she and Abraham had become accustomed. They would need to add on to their tent; no longer could they sleep in as they enjoyed the luxury of retirement; they would have to awaken to feed, bathe, and care for a child. After so many years being childless such a lifestyle change was beyond her imagination. Her laugh signaled her lack of belief in such a ridiculous possibility. But laughter is also a sign of joy, and there was a tinge of joy as Sarah laughed. She had long ago given up her dream of

bearing a child, but now that the possibility presented itself, that longing was rekindled. Fear, skepticism, and delight all were bundled up in her laughter.

Sarah's laughter was heard by the messenger, who thought that Sarah doubted the promises of God. The angel preached, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" In other words, "Nothing is impossible for God." Lo and behold, a few chapters later we are told that God's promise is fulfilled. A child is born to Abraham and Sarah, and he is named Isaac, which means "laughter." Upon his birth Sarah joyously said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:1-6).

Like Sarah and Abraham standing at the threshold of their tent, we all find ourselves at moments when we are betwixt and between life circumstances. A threshold experience is marked both by pain and potential. At the threshold we experience the pain of loss, grief for what is left behind, sadness about what will never be again. It is natural to feel a sense of loss, even when one embarks upon an exciting new adventure. The other side of the threshold presents the potential for something else. The entrance into a new adventure holds the possibility of transformation and the emergence of a new identity.

The story of Isaac's birth announcement offers us some tools for coping with times of transition and change in our lives. The first tool is humor. Sarah laughed upon hearing of the change that she was about to experience. Her laughter may have been a sign of nervousness, or disbelief, or joy, or all three all at once. She must have known the positive power of laughter for she named the unexpected son of her old age, Isaac, "Laughter." Humor would be a good tool to see her through Isaac's childhood and adolescence with all its joys and challenges.

It has been said that after God created the world, God made man and woman. Then to keep the whole thing from collapsing, God invented humor. In his classic book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins shared the tremendous healing power of laughter in his own life. In fact, laughter changed the course of his journey, leading him from a terminal diagnosis onto a pathway of life and wholeness. In his hospital bed he watched amusing movies, Allen Funt's television show, *Candid Camera*, and Marx Brothers films. Ten minutes of genuine belly laughter would give him at least two hours of pain-free sleep. When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, they turned on the projector for another dose of laughter, which often led to pain-free sleep. He laughed so much that he disturbed the other patients and had to leave the hospital for a hotel room!ⁱ

Laughter is healthy and healing. It helps us get through those in between times when we feel disoriented and confused, when life is perplexing and uncertain. Ever notice how everyone who gets a flat tire can laugh about it a week or a month later? The shorter the distance between the flat and the laugh, the healthier the body, the keener the mind, the stronger the spirit.

The great 19th century preacher Henry Ward Beecher was involved in many controversial situations. One time, after he had taken sides on a particularly perplexing and vexing subject, he received a letter in which was included only one word: "Fool."

The next Sunday Beecher took the letter with him into the pulpit and said, "In my lifetime I have received many letters from people who forgot to sign their names. This is the first time I have ever received a letter from a person who signed his name and forgot to write the letter."

Humor helps us move through liminal spaces of transition. Another tool for times of change is hope. At the threshold of unexpected news that would drastically change her life, Sarah was reminded by the angel, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Mary heard a

similar message when she received the announcement of Jesus' impending birth: "For nothing will be impossible with God."

When the sands are shifting beneath us, when what is familiar is lost and what is yet to be is still unknown, we feel disoriented and can easily become discouraged. We can lose confidence, not only in ourselves and in our circumstances, but also in God. It's like the hint of disbelief in Sarah's laughter; we doubt that even God can do such an incredible thing.

Even though it may be a long time in coming, God keeps God's promises. And the greatest promise of all is God's presence even in the most difficult and threatening of places. God may not act in the way in which we wish, but God will act – mightily and powerfully.

Jim Wallis says, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change."

A story is told of a rabbi in a European village, who one day summoned the townspeople to the village square. He said he had an important announcement. The people gathered, but not without much grumbling at the inconvenience. The merchant resented having to leave his business. The wife complained because she had so many errands to run. But, out of respect, they went unwillingly to the town square.

When all were present, the rabbi said, "I wish to announce there is a God in the world." That was all he said. But the people understood. They knew they had been acting as if God did not exist.

Humor and hope – gifts of God to move us through one phase of life into the next, tools of life to assist us in coping with the changing circumstances all around us.

May the laughter of Sarah and Isaac and the hope of God's messengers sustain you as you move through the thresholds of life.

ⁱ Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), pp. 39-40.