

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent 20 December 2020

### Genesis 18

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. 2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. 4 Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. 5 Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

7 Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. 8 He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

10 Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. 11 Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old,

will I now have this pleasure?"

13 Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Dear sisters and brothers,

What a strange text! If I read the connecting passages, it strikes me how often the word "laughter" features. Yet, it is no joyful laughter. It is a laughter of disbelief, of shattered dreams and lost hope!

A bit earlier on we read how Abraham laughs at the same promise of a child to Sarah. Laughter, because every one knows that it is too late! They had been hoping for the promised offspring for years, decades - until nature went its way and Sarah was beyond child bearing age. Too late! This promise of a child at their age causes Sarah to think further: What will the people say? They too will laugh! What a funny sight - an old pregnant granny! How embarrassing!

This is the kind of laughter mentioned here. And to cap it all, the son to be born is to be called Izaak - which actually is exactly the same Hebrew word stem and means: Laughter!

When we read on, we realise that at the birth of the baby the bitter laughter has indeed changed into joy, laughter of relief: God did keep his promise! Isn't it amazing! And so the name Izaak actually shows that the laughter of disbelief transforms into the laughter of amazing grace!

We are entering the week of Christmas. "Joy to the world" we would normally sing with excitement and jubilation - but this year is different. It has become in many ways a year of disappointment, of shattered dreams, and for millions a year of hopelessness.

I can imagine that many, many people feel like Abraham and Sarah: plans have been shelved, even buried. Dreams that eleven months ago were in the making, travels that finally would materialize, children or grandchildren that would be visited or would visit - it all fell through. And so I can imagine that deep down many Christians, when celebrating Christmas this year, will have this bitter Laughter: How can one be joyful in a time like this?

It is then that I realise: This passage is a message for all those who have given up hope - like Abraham and Sarah. A message for all who have given up hope on South Africa, on the promises of an end to corruption, on the possibility of a clean, efficient government for the benefit of all.

It is a text that speaks to all who have given up on hoping for their congregation to move forward, who are tired of working, sacrificing their time and talents and still see the congregation shrinking away.

It is a message to all who in their personal life have given up on hoping for a better future - who are in pain because of a long lasting, even terminal illness. Who have lost their job and are too old to find a new one. Who have messed up their relationship, their marriage, their friendships.

So, what is the message to us all?

To Abraham and Sarah God said: I will give you a son, Izaak. And he did. Laughter of surprise, astonishment.

In Philippians 4, 7 we read: "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

How? To be honest - I don't know! I do know that the gospel that we read, where Mary is promised a child (Luke 1,26-38) is much more joyful than Genesis 18. Perhaps Mary was far too young to understand the implications, whereas Abraham and Sarah were wise old people that knew what was possible and what not.

Perhaps that is the point: The peace of God *transcends* understanding. It is not bound to what makes sense and what not. It can transform the heart and mind without making sense!

This, dear sister and brother, is my wish for you for this coming week: That this peace of God, revealed in Christ, will overcome you, will change bitter laughter of disappointment into laughter of joy! Especially if you are now shaking your head and are thinking: Dream on - it's not going to happen, then my wish for you is that you will be as surprised as Sarah. This is my prayer for you!

Amen

*Horst Müller, Bishop NELCSA Email: hmuller@nelcsa.net*