

Grace Church, St. Francisville

Proper 6

June 18, 2017

What would be the reactivity today if a ninety year old woman were to conceive and safely deliver a child? What would be said of a man 100 years old who fathered this child? The Internet would vibrate with reproach. Tongues would wag, some would anxiously note the problems to be encountered, such as how would a 110 year old father and a 100 year old mother do at a Little League game? Some would decry this as an imprudent and even immoral action. And the jokes, they would be plenty. Late night TV would have a field day discussing Abraham's diet. You get the picture.

I find the reaction of Abraham and Sarah to be a refreshing contradiction to the reality of the burden of modern believing. Faith, believing, religion, the Church have been too long viewed as a burden to be borne rather than a freedom to love. Joy has been largely been squeezed, or if you remember those old washing machines with a wringer on top, Joy has been wringed from faith and practice. In the place of joy, there is fear of making a wrong move, of saying the wrong thing, of believing that which ought not be believed. I like worship, even when it is somewhat dry, shall I say, I think it an honor to be welcomed at God's holy altar and to be fed with the bread of heaven. I need to be here, I want to be here, I enjoy (well most of the time) being here to find and to be found by God. Do not hear what I am not saying, I do not think that worship should be entertainment ! Transcendence should not be confused with entertainment. Both have their place. I will remind you of a story told by Bishop Michael Marshall of London about the time that Bishop Iveson Noland, the ninth Bishop of Louisiana came to visit at All Saint's Margaret Street, in London. That parish was and is, fulsome in worship, that is to say that it is extremely high Church! At the luncheon after Mass a young man, one who still knew that

he knew all he needed to know, including that Louisiana was hardly an extremely high Church Diocese, questioned our beloved Bishop saying, *Bishop, I guess you found our worship this morning to be a bit extreme for you.* Bishop Noland replied, “When I consider what my Lord has done for me, how can I consider anything I return to Him in worship to be extreme?” I might add that Bishop Marshall does a good job of getting our Louisiana accent right when the story is told.

Though not part of our reading from Genesis this morning, when in Chapter 17 Abraham learns of God’s plan for him to father a first child at age 100, the Bible reads, *then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who a hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is ninety years old bear a child?”*

“What was Sarah’s reaction when she learned that she was to conceive? Sarah laughed. Sarah then denied her laughter for she was afraid. Did God punish Sarah for her laughter? No, hear again what God said, *Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?* Hear clearly, God did not chastise or rebuke Sarah, rather came the question, *Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?* When Isaac was born, we read again of Sarah’s joy, *now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”* The Joy of God’s work in the lives of Abraham and Sarah caused them to laugh; there was no rebuke for God had acted.

It is difficult to see God’s action, grace and mercy in the midst of hurt, pain, disease or danger. I more often see the wonderfulness of God in retrospect and I am thankful. To see God active in the moment is not a gift I often enjoy, but when the scales fall from my eyes to see, there is JOY. So it has been with those who proclaim the Good News of God in Jesus Christ since Jesus gave the Great Commission to the apostles and then to the seventy.

This has been a week of reversal for which Fr. Peter has worked mighty and I lightly. We have seen bills pass in the legislature which should shed Louisiana of the dishonor of having the highest incarceration rate in

the world. Such reforms should also save the taxpayer a fortune. One of the early workers in prison reform, who knew the JOY of God's action and saw and enabled God's wonderful work was Francis Joseph Guadet. She was the daughter of slaves and worked for justice and prison reform most of her life in New Orleans. She was greatly aided by the Diocese of Louisiana and the Episcopal Church in the United States. So, thinking of Joy and the promise of the wonderful work of God, I quote directly from Madame Gaudet, with a trigger warning *I have still another abominable system to speak of. My friend, Miss B., and I were just leaving Judge Marmouget's court, when we noticed the police van, a wagon closed in on all sides, standing before the building. White and black, male and female, were crowded into this dark vehicle like animals in a cage. Miss B was horrified. I explained the evil effects of this system and asked her to get the Era Club to take steps to abolish it. She asked me the best way to go about it, so I explained what I thought best. She exclaimed, "My, you have a fine mind, you ought to be a white woman." I felt hurt and answered "I would not insult my God who made me by finding fault with this swarthy skin. He knows what is best and placed me where he had need of me, and I am grateful to Him for the opportunity to show the world that I can serve Him well where he has placed me."* He Leadeth Me pp.140-141

IS ANYTHING TOO WONDERFUL FOR THE LORD?