

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - June 14, 2020**  
**“Plot Twists”**  
**Genesis 18:1-15 and Genesis 21:1-7**

When it comes to making decisions, most people “tend to search for and use evidence that confirms our beliefs and hypotheses, and we gloss over or ignore information that contradicts them.”<sup>1</sup> This is “an exercise of selectively building and interpreting experience known as the confirmation bias.”<sup>2</sup>

We can see this bias clearly in our first lesson this morning where the Lord visits Abraham at his tent-home in the form of three men. As they engage in conversation, Abraham’s wife overhears them. What is said is so astounding that it’s actually amusing. One of the men says, “Where is your wife Sarah?” Abraham replies, “There, in the tent.” The visitor continues, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2015/05/fooled-by-experience>.

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At this point in the narrative, Sarah is old. She has tried to conceive for many years without success. And now, she is holding onto a very rational, seemingly airtight, confirmation bias. That is, postmenopausal women do not give birth to children. So when this visitor claims that she will bear a son, the information stands in opposition, not only to her personal experience, but the experience of every other woman she knows.

Sarah does not present herself as the type of person who is gullible and prone to false hope. No. She seems grounded and realistic. And upon hearing the speculation that she will bear a son in her old age, Sarah begins to laugh. We get it because we understand what it's like to live under the weight of unfulfilled hopes. We have all yearned for things that have not come to pass. And we are aware of those whose hope has been so thoroughly devastated that they cannot imagine a way forward.

Faith is so challenging because it calls us to place our trust in that which we cannot see. To maintain that nothing is impossible for God. To say that, as long as God has promised it, God will be faithful. Ultimately, the struggle within us emerges when we do not see or experience the fulfillment of God's promises as swiftly as we envisioned or in the manner in which we

imagined. Yes. It is exceedingly hard for us to believe that God is greater than the sum of our confirmation biases.

All of this, I think, turns on the question of what it means to be wise. Oftentimes, when we think of wisdom, we imagine someone who is older. Perhaps, even someone who is no longer living. Someone who has finished her race. Who has kept the faith. Who now rests from her labors.

We know that wisdom is a rare quality among the young because wisdom is borne from experience. Those who are older are more likely to have overcome numerous challenges. And as a result, they are more likely to have developed wisdom which emerges from prior experiences and shapes how they will engage in the future.

Still, there is a big difference between true wisdom and self-righteous posturing. Oftentimes, those who think of themselves as wise are lacking in humility. They have forgotten that all human knowledge is limited - even our own. And believing that they have seen it all before, they turn to cynicism. I'm reminded here of Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, where we find these words: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun."

In 2002, a cable company aired a commercial with a man typing away at his home computer. After several clicks, his screen displayed a message while a robotic voice read it aloud: “Alert. You have reached the end of the internet. You have seen everything there is to see.” “Woah,” the man replied. “I finished it.”

This notion that there is nothing new under the sun is not just cynical; it’s plainly false. We know, for example, that technology advances in every age. We know that new scientific discoveries emerge daily. And we know that those who are advanced in years can learn to do things in new ways and consider possibilities that they had never imagined before. Yes. There is, in fact, something new under the sun. And each day serves as an opportunity to challenge our long-held confirmation biases.

That commercial is amusing because it implies that it is possible to span the depths of all knowledge. We know better. And, in time, so would Sarah, who gave birth to a child whose Hebrew name would be translated as “laughter.” At the end of the day, faith is a question of whether we believe that nothing is impossible for God. Because, if we doubt this, if we are willing

to put limits on the kinds of things that God is able to say, and do, and promise, then our trust is incomplete.

Thus, I invite us to ask if there is anything new under the sun. Yes. Are we willing to make room for the mystery of the Trinity, which arrives like the visitors of Abraham and Sarah, bringing news so radical and different that it will upend all preconceived notions? Are we willing to make room for a God like that?

Back in January, if someone had told me that, beginning in March, our church leadership would choose to suspend in person activities for several months this year, my response would have been one of utter disbelief. I would have shaken my head and smirked. I may have even laughed. The suggestion would have seemed that implausible.

As implausible as Noah called to build an ark. As implausible as Moses called to lead the people with a speech impediment. As implausible as the boy, David, called to face the warrior, Goliath. As implausible as the Savior conceived in Mary's womb before marriage. As implausible as salvation through the cross, the resurrection, and the reappearance narratives.

With no precedent or template for the current pandemic in most of our lifetimes, we have still found a way, like faithful people of God in every age, to believe in the divine promise and to carry on in hope. For, indeed, there is something new under the sun that we each bear witness to even now. May it be so, and all thanks be to God for life's meandering course. Amen.