

Little Old Ladies

Genesis 17:15-22; 18:1-15

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“What will the little old ladies think?” You cannot imagine how often I have been asked that question in nearly 50 years of ministry. Usually it is right after I or someone else in the church, says or does something that is a little out of the ordinary.

One particular instance comes to mind. As some of you know we vacation for a week every summer with three other families with whom we became friends during our seminary days. Back in 1979 when we were all at the beach together it was my day to go into town and secure provisions from a long list of needs and wishes. At that time there were many men who were beginning to get a different kind of hairstyle which required a tight, curly permanent in their hair which left the end result looking something like a short afro hairstyle. Now ordinarily I am not an impulsive person, but here I was a thousand miles from my church back in Mississippi, time to spare, and feeling just a little bit frisky. I also had this felt need that I needed to do something different about my appearance because up until that time I had been combing my hair the same way, day after day, for 33 years and I was sick of the way I looked and thought probably everyone else was as well.

Well, after being assured that if I didn't like it, I could come back and get it “relaxed.” I paid my money, got my perm, and spent my first of many sessions under one of those old beehive hair dryers.

When I arrived back at our beach house several hours later and stepped among my unsuspecting family and friends — well, you would have thought I'd walked into the room with no clothes on judging by the reaction I got. Some stood slack jawed in amazement and disbelief. Other laughed uproariously. I soon concluded that the reaction was well worth any time or money I had invested in getting my permanent.

Then came the challenge from one of my minister friends: “Massie, you don't have the courage ... well, he said words similar to that... Massie, you don't have the courage to wear that thing into the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church in Vicksburg, Mississippi. All the little old ladies would go nuts!”

I don't know what it is about me. But there is something in me that just cannot resist a challenge. And so, I decided to return to Vicksburg, Afro and all, and do a quick, gut-level assessment of just how loyal and supportive my flock back home would be. Unfortunately, the first time my people saw me was when I walked into the pulpit on Sunday morning because we had arrived back from vacation last Saturday evening. The reaction from the congregation as I stepped into the pulpit was not unlike the reaction back at the beach house in North Carolina. But, the long and short of it is that I ended up keeping that hair style for about three years. And as for the "little old ladies" ... well, let me assure you that they handled it just fine. As a matter of fact, the "little old ladies" proved to be much more flexible and receptive of this strange new thing than most of their little old husbands.

For the most part "little old ladies" have taken a bad rap. On the whole, they are much more flexible, resilient, and adventuresome and much more open to doing an old thing in a new way than their reputation suggests. As a matter of fact, in every church I have ever been a member of or on the staff of I have observed that it is the "little old ladies" who have been among the most creative, the most innovative, the most energetic, the most committed, the most fearless, the most determined, the most faithful, and the most supportive of the church and of me personally. And therefore, I would like to suggest to you today that what most folks mean really when they say "little old ladies" has nothing to do with being little, or old, or even a lady. Rather, being a "little old lady" means having a mindset that is resistant to change, closed to new ideas, disinterested in new possibilities or new challenges. In a spiritual sense, "little old ladies" are those people of every age, gender and size who believe that God has no surprises in store for them and therefore are not really open to new possibilities. (Today's sermon is actually an example of what I was arguing last week and that is that a biblical faith, especially an Easter faith, is quite different from Stoicism, the philosophy that believes life is static and ruled by natural law and God doesn't do new and amazing things.)

With all of this in mind I would like for us to look this morning at one of my favorite stories from the Bible: the announcement to Abraham and Sarah that they are about to become parents at the ripe old age of 100 and 90 respectively. Now despite what I have just said, this story concerns a "little old lady" who also happens to have had a "little old lady" mindset at least initially. I think there is something that each of us can learn from her story. With apologies now to "the Holy Men who were taught by the Holy Ghost" and also to Frederick Buechner in his books *Telling the Truth; The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy and Fairy Tale*, I would now like to retell Abraham and Sarah's story, hoping that we might hear it in a new way. (The following rendition, apart from a few personal revisions is found in Buechner's book, pp. 50-53) So lets hear an old story in a new way.

Once upon a time way back in Mesopotamia Abe and Sarah became husband and wife. It was a marriage made in heaven they all said and after a brief honeymoon trip down the Tigris

and Euphrates they settled down to a quiet, comfortable life there in the Ur of the Chaldees. They were buying a nice little ranch style home in the suburbs, had a two-car garage, a color TV, microwave, and gas grill out back. Someone had even given them a baby crib for a wedding gift and a room had been all prepared for the day when their first eagerly awaited child would be born. Their families lived nearby in Mesopotamia and often kidded them about being available as built-in babysitters whenever needed. Sarah bought all of her clothes at a fashionable boutique downtown, did volunteer work one day a week at King's Daughter's Hospital, and was the secretary for the Junior League. She was also in charge of the program for the Young Couples Club at the Fertile Crescent Presbyterian Church. Young Abe, not to be outdone, was a promising junior executive at Chaldean Bank and Trust, pulling down an excellent salary for a young man, plus generous fringe benefits and an enlightened pension plan.

Then something happened! Abraham got religion, or as his friends said privately, religion got Abraham! Regardless, Abe became convinced that he and Sarah should pull up stakes and head out for a land called Canaan where the Lord God had promised him that they would become the progenitors of a great nation and even become a blessing to all the families of the earth. Canaan did not appeal very much to Sarah. She had never seen any travel brochures on the place and while the idea of children was her life's ambition; she had become a little anxious about the fact that her OB/GYN had been less than encouraging. But, she thought, better to go now, if we must, than to set out on such a journey while pregnant.

So, Abe and Sarah put their house on the market, gave their color TV to the Habitat Resale Store, rented a U-Haul-It trailer and packed up their crib and a few other items and set out on the long journey. They also made the mistake of taking their brother-in-law, Lot along with them, a decision that would later haunt them.

Abraham had written an eloquent letter of resignation to the president and board of the bank and he had received an equally eloquent letter in reply, assuring him "that there would always be a job waiting for him should he change his mind and come back." The original draft of that letter had said, "If he ever regained his senses and came back," but the president decided the milder wording would be more appropriate from a man in his position. After all, the president had nothing against religion and felt that if practiced in moderation, like exercise and alcohol, then it was okay. But going overboard like Abraham and Sarah was a bit absurd.

Now in Yiddish the word *schlemiel* can be translated as the kind of person who goes around spilling soup on other people, while the word *schlemozzle* is the kind of person who always has the soup land on his or her lap. And there's no question about it, Abe seemed to be a *schlemozzle* after he left Mesopotamia. Almost everything worked against him. Sarah was such a beautiful and shapely young woman that he was afraid that the Pharaoh might kill him in order to claim her as his own, so he told everyone that Sarah was really his sister. When he finally was

forced into admitting the truth, he sustained a considerable loss of face and credibility, but financially it proved to be a bonanza.

When after many frustrating and disappointing years, Sarah became convinced that she would never have a child, she told Abraham that he should have a child by her maid, Hagar. Abraham decided to take her up on the offer and in so doing stirred up a hornet's nest in the home. "Hagar is acting haughty," Sarah later claimed, "so you choose which one of us you want!" It was an unpleasant situation at best, but Abraham stuck by Sarah, because, after all, she had stuck by him in leaving home and in traipsing off to the far country.

Another thing that went wrong was that when Abraham reached the Promised Land, a nasty situation developed between him and his in-laws. Lot and his crowd claimed that the place wasn't big enough for both of them, and Abraham's crowd said they couldn't agree more. So Abraham proposed that they divide the land in two and each take a half. He then made the mistake of telling Lot that he could choose his half first. Well, of course, Lot chose the fertile pastureland down by the river Jordan and left Abraham nothing but the barren disaster area, known locally as Dead Man's Gulch. You see, while all of Canaan was called the Promised Land, some parts of it were a good deal more promising than others!

Not only that, but the Women's Fertility Clinic there in Canaan told Sarah that there were few chances of her ever conceiving and bearing a child.

So here they are, Abe and Sarah, two once hopeful, once energetic, once trusting people living in a tent in Dead Man's Gulch. Was this really the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey they had heard so much about? And what about God's other promise about children and descendants? Well, it all seemed a cruel hoax.

And so it was that the years rolled by faster and faster, like empty baby buggies, until Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90. And God's promise? ... Well, it seemed as far away as Mesopotamia. And Sarah --- well, physically, mentally, and spiritually she had been reduced to being a "little old lady." She had ceased believing in or hoping for miracles. Her years of productivity, her zest for living, her seasons of confident trust in God were all behind her. There was nothing new under the sun and all of her adventures were behind her --- or at least so she thought!

Then one day something very strange happened. Theologians call it a theophany --- a visible manifestation of God. Three men, really three angels disguised as traveling salesmen, came to pay a visit to Abraham under the sacred trees of Mamre. While Sarah listened from the doorway of the tent she overheard the Lord's announcement through these strange guests that

God was going to make good on that promise of his at long last and that in nine months she and Abraham were going to be the proud parents of a son.

Well ... you know what they did? They laughed. At first, they tried to hold back the laughter, to choke it down or to think of something else because it's serious business when you're talking with God you know. But the more they tried to contain their laughter, the more hilarious and absurd the whole situation became. One account suggests that Abraham laughed until he fell on his face and another that Sarah was the one who really laughed, albeit first at herself. Are you acquainted with the word *titter*? *Titter* is a verb which means to laugh with convulsive efforts at suppression. That's what happened to Abe and Sarah at 100 and 90 respectively. They tittered there beside the tent beneath the oaks. They tried to suppress what was hilariously funny and their efforts almost convulsed them.

You've been in situations like this, haven't you? Maybe you're sitting in church or at a funeral and all of a sudden something strikes you that is so funny you want to burst. The harder you try to hold back the laughter the more difficult it becomes. Tears stream down your face. You turn red. You put your hands over your mouth. But all is to no avail.

So, Abraham and Sarah laughed and if it had been you or me, we would have laughed too. They laughed when they looked at each other and thought about all the possibilities. They laughed when they thought of a baby being born in the geriatric ward of Canaan General Hospital, and they collapsed on the floor. As they lay there laughing and wiping their tears, Abraham spoke up and said: "Sarah, call Medicare and see if they have maternity benefits." And they laughed some more. And Sarah responded in kind: "Abe, when you stop by the drug store for that Poligrip, bring home some pampers!" And they laughed some more.

"Oh no," cried Sarah suddenly, "I gave the baby crib as an antique for the Youth Mission Auction at church." And they laughed some more.

Abraham and Sarah laugh because the angel not only seemed to believe his message, but he expected them to believe it too. They laugh because part of them really does believe and because another part of them says that it would take a senile fool to fall for something like this. They laugh because laughter is better than crying and perhaps not all that different. They laugh because if by some crazy chance the angel's message was true, then that really would be something to laugh about, something to celebrate, and something even to live for. They laugh at God and they laugh with God and they laugh at themselves as well because laughter and weeping are alike in that regard. No matter what the immediate occasion is of your laughter or your tears, the object usually ends up being yourself and your own life.

But I want you to notice something interesting about the laughter of Abraham and Sarah. The Lord doesn't condemn them for it but seems, as it were, to join right in. When God asks Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?" she immediately becomes frightened and denies the laughter. And God responds, more in sympathy than in condemnation, "Yes, you did. You laughed!"

And then the Lord even suggests that they name their new son, Isaac, which means laughter in Hebrew. So, one interpretation might be that God not only tolerated their laughter, but he blessed it and baptized it and gave it a namesake.

Wouldn't it be fair to say that when we get to the close of the story, Sarah might still have been a "little old lady" in a technical sense but she surely didn't have a "little old lady" mentality. Try to convince Sarah, an expectant Sarah at age 90, or Abe a father at 100, that God has no surprises in store for us. Try to tell Sarah and Abe that God cannot do miraculous and wonderful things in you and through us. Try to tell Sarah and Abe that God doesn't keep his promises or that there is nothing new under the sun. Try to tell that to Sarah and this "little old lady," or senior citizen, would just laugh in your face.

So friends here's the point: are we open to God's doing new and miraculous things in our lives, despite our age or size, or gender, or life situation? Are any of us beyond the reach, or the use of our God?

I would like to close with a story of which I think wonderfully illustrates what I am saying about little old ladies. Back in 1979 I clipped and filed an *Associated Press* news item entitled, "Handy Women is Classic 'Little Old Lady.'" It was the story about a 73-year-old lady by the name of Louise Snyder and told of all her many activities within her community and church in Sayreville, New Jersey. The article begins:

To look at her, Louise Snyder would be anybody's candidate for the classic little old lady. She is little, about 5'2", has white hair, rimless glasses. She is 73. She crochets dainty things, embroiders, makes her own dresses and bakes pies for the church bazaar.

But wait. Could that be she climbing around on that scaffold?

Just so. Grandmotherly Louise Snyder also might be the best-known paper hanger, painter, carpenter, bricklayer, concrete pourer, and all-round handyman in town, or handywoman.

"I've never thought of work as being man's work or woman's work," she said.

"Work is work. You do what you have to do."

Well obviously, Louise Snyder did more than what she had to do. In addition to all her paper hanging and painting, the article said she was an active member of First Presbyterian

Church of Sayreville. At one point she baked ten loaves of bread a day and sold them to waiting customers in order to help fund the installation of stained-glass windows in the sanctuary.

Twelve years later as I read again this story I had filed away, of this wonderful “little old lady” I found myself wondering what had become of Louise Snyder since 1979.

So, in the early 90’s I placed a call to the First Presbyterian Church of Sayreville and asked the minister who answered the phone, who was relatively new in that position, if there was still a member of his church by the name of Louise Snyder. “Indeed, there is,” he responded, “and if you had called yesterday you could have found her here at this church because she was here all-day making coleslaw for the Christian Education supper last night.” He went on to say that she was as active as involved as ever at 85. She was in charge of the pork chop dinner coming up in the following week and was really put out recently when the Session refused to allow her to do all the paper hanging and painting when the church recently refurbished the manse. It wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, said her pastor, but simply that people were afraid to let her climb up on the ladders.

May God bless the Abe’s and Sarah’s and Louise Snyder’s of this world. And may God bless all the little old ladies and little old men, all the middle age men and middle age ladies, all the boys and girls who refuse to give in to the temptation to think that they are beyond the use of God or that God cannot accomplish wonderful things in and through them. That’s just one of the many wonderful traits of this amazing God you and I worship and serve.

Prayer:

Gracious Lord, we know that you never give up on us so help us never to give up on ourselves. We rejoice that you are a God who can do things in us and through us greater than we could ever ask or imagine. Keep us open to new possibilities for our lives and for serving you and others and make us effective channels of your love and power, whatever our age or circumstances, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.