

## Yes, But or Can You Imagine?

September 3, 2023

Rev. Bill Eichhorn



*The birth of Isaac*

### Readings

#### Genesis 17: 15-19

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

#### It's the Dream

By Olav H. Hauge

It is the dream we carry  
that something wonderful will happen,  
that it must happen –  
that time will open,  
that our hearts may open,  
that doors shall open,  
and the mountain shall open,  
that springs will gush forth –  
that our dreams will open,  
and that one morning we'll glide  
into a cove we didn't know.

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I want to indulge in a moment of “I told you so.” Last October, I read you a poem, “It Is the Dream,” and promised you that our dream of receiving a new settled pastor would be fulfilled. I assured you that the Spirit would give the Search Team the wisdom and courage needed to discern the one God wanted to send us to be our next minister. Last Sunday, that promise was fulfilled when we called Rev. Jess Shine to be our next pastor.

## **It's the Dream**

Olav Hauge

It's the dream we carry in secret  
that something miraculous will happen,  
that it must happen –  
that time will open  
that the heart will open  
that doors will open  
that the mountains will open  
that springs will gush –  
that the dream will open,  
that one morning we will glide into  
some little harbor we didn't know was there.

*~ translated by Robin Fulton*

I don't know how long we will get to hang out in this snug little harbor, but what I do know is that at some point, Rev. Shine and the Board will bring us a vision, a plan that will take us out of the harbor and launch us on a new journey in the open sea of the future. They will have discerned the promise God is offering to CCC. When that time comes, like Abraham and Sarah, we will struggle with the same fears they felt. God asks them to imagine the wild possibility they will have a child who will become a great leader of the Hebrew people. They are incredulous – *Yes, but I am so old. Yes, but she isn't pregnant and we already have a son. Why won't he do? You want us to leave our home and head out on a long journey to an unknown destination. But that's crazy! It's too hard, too long.* Abraham is full of “Yes, but,” as we are, when we are called to embrace a promise that seems impossible, to sail toward a vision that seems way beyond our reach.

Interpreting this Genesis story, Professor Walter Brueggemann comments that it teaches us there is “a dialogue set up in our faith. One voice says, ‘Can you imagine!’ The other voice answers, ‘Yes, but.’ ...Can you entrust possibilities to God that go beyond your own capacity for control and fabrication?” Professor Brueggemann goes on to show how this dialogue is in the New Testament.

The people around Jesus are filled with the grudging hesitance of “yes, but.” Jesus comes and says, “Can you imagine a dinner for all? Can you imagine a blind boy to see? Can you imagine a prodigal welcomed home? .... Can you imagine lepers healed, widows cared for, poor people made first-class citizens?” Of course, it was judged impossible, but Jesus ran powerfully ahead of such fear. (The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, pgs. 9-13)

Can you, can we, imagine a CCC bursting with the energy of diversity? Can you imagine a Sunday morning where the contemplative spirit of the 8:30 service attracts young, single adults and people are streaming into the 10:00 o'clock service because of the inclusive welcome they experience? Can you imagine new, rich spiritual forms for worship and celebration? Can you imagine initiating, as well as participating in, new partnerships with the three UCC congregations in Marin – new interfaith alliances working for justice and peace? Can you imagine a world where everyone has enough to eat, a place to live? Can you imagine a world of valued old people? The possibilities, my friends, are endless, because God has a very long list of what God imagines for this world.

The story of Abraham and Sarah reminds us that God makes outrageous promises and calls people of faith to embrace those promises by imagining they will come true. God calls us to tap the energy that arises in us when we say *Can you imagine?* rather than *Yes, but*.

Now, one of the biggest hinderances to tapping that creative energy of imagination is the *Yes, but*. *Yes, but Frank and Carol didn't do it that way, or Yes, but Curran and David always did it this way, or Yes, but, Ann and Bill always said....* My friends, let's be clear: the future God imagines for us will not in any way be a replication of the past. I believe it will be something startlingly new. So let us keep these words from the prophet Isaiah before us in the weeks and months ahead: "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old; behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

In order to perceive what that new thing is for us, we need to be the people on the hill who don't say grudgingly, "Yes, but" to a new way of being church. Instead, let us declare: "We can imagine that!" Let us be ready to leave the comfortable cove. Let us be willing to launch ourselves into the wide-open sea, trusting that our God is One who makes promises and keeps them.

I want to close with a story. Before I accepted the call to be pastor of the Mill Valley Community Church in 1971, the conference minister told me I should think of my ministry there as a long, three-year interim because my predecessor had been the minister there for twenty-three years. Under his leadership in the 1950's, the church grew from a small congregation to one that had three services, three pastors and a large, active couples group; however, by 1971 the congregation was much smaller and much older. There was an expectation that a young pastor with his wife and four children would attract lots of new members and revive the congregation into the thriving church it had been. But God presented to the congregation another possibility. God promised us we could build The Redwoods. So instead of worrying about attracting new, younger members, the congregation said, "We can imagine ourselves building The Redwoods, even if none of the other churches will join in the effort." And we did. Four years after completing The Redwoods, God said, "You will build the first infant, toddler, childcare center in Marin." We said, "We can imagine that!" and with the help of a \$275,000 grant from the Buck Foundation that Ann acquired, we established a childcare center with different levels of tuition, so the center could serve low-income families. After that, God said, "I want you to imagine that if you would partner with the Saint Andrews Presbyterian Church in Marin City to sponsor a fourteen-member family of Vietnam refugees you will be able to do that." After that, it was taking a family from El Salvador into sanctuary to protect them from the violence of the death squads. We imagined that, and formed a partnership with Fairfax Community Church, First Congregational Church of San Rafael and CCC (Susan Bristol was one of the co-chairs of the support committee). The four churches raised the money to provide a home for a family of four for two years.

Each time God called us to embrace one of God's wild promises, there were always some "Yes, buts"; however, as we gave space for those concerns and fears to be heard and explored, our faith always led us to "We can imagine it!" I should add that we did add new members along the way, mostly because of what the congregation was doing to make the community a better place. We never did look like what the church was in the 1950's. I was pastor there for twenty years.

My friends, God is doing a new thing with the church in these times. God will come to us with a daring new promise of what we can do and be. I believe Rev. Jess Shine was sent to CCC to help us discern that promise and act on it. It is up to us to remember not the former things, nor dwell on the things of the past, but rather to declare *we can imagine that kind of future*.

Until God comes to us with an outrageous promise that will test our capacity to say, "We can and we will imagine that," let us enjoy our time in this pleasant little harbor. At Stone Soup this week, Liz Jones called our attention to this poem by Stanley Kunitz:

### **The Long Boat**

Stanley Kunitz

When his boat snapped loose  
from its mooring, under  
the screaming of the gulls,  
he tried at first to wave  
to his dear ones on shore,  
but in the rolling fog  
they had already lost their faces.  
Too tired even to choose  
between jumping and calling,  
somehow he felt absolved and free  
of his burdens, those mottoes  
stamped on his name-tag:  
conscience, ambition, and all  
that caring.  
He was content to lie down  
with the family ghosts  
in the slop of his cradle,  
buffeted by the storm,  
endlessly drifting.  
Peace! Peace!  
To be rocked by the Infinite!  
As if it didn't matter  
which way was home;  
as if he didn't know  
he loved the earth so much  
he wanted to stay forever.

Rocked by the infinite. That's us for now, for now. But a day not far off will come when God's promise will call us to say: "Yes, we can imagine that, and we know that a yes means yes! Say that again with me: a *yes means yes*."