



**Beyond the Limits**  
**Rev Susan Adams**

Genesis 18:1-15  
Matthew 9:35-10:8  
Ordinary 11  
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You laughed.  
No I didn't!  
Oh yes you did, you laughed!  
I didn't

Who of us haven't laughed when something we are told about ourselves seems stupendously ridiculous, Or perhaps to cover fear and embarrassment? We tend to laugh when told something strange and improbable! To have a baby in her late old age (90) with a husband verging on 100 is certainly ludicrous

I don't think the story is about an old women defying the terms of biology and giving birth well beyond the age limit of human probability. Nor do I think the Matthew story is really about Jesus breaking the laws of physics and biology by raising the dead and instantly healing lepers and giving sight to the blind.

*I do think, however, that at depth, both stories are about the same thing! I think they are both about a dearth of political leadership!*

It's here, with our own current global crisis in leadership, that the texts speak to us and connect with our experience today.

Sarah laughed at the very thought she could conceive - she had lived so long with the shame of infertility and disappointment. *Her story is not only about personal biology but also about her social and emotional circumstance.* Here too it connects with so the experience of so many of us:

- We laugh too when we hear politicians promise justice while the wealth gap widens and more people fall into poverty.

- We laugh nervously when leaders and nations speak of peace and wars gather momentum.
- We laugh cynically when politicians and corporations promise environmental responsibility while continuing policies and decisions that heat up oceans, burn forests, expand droughts and contaminate water.

We laugh *defensively* because it often feels safer than hope and more disappointment.

We laugh *nervously* because the promises are not reflected in our experiences.

Let's remember Sarah, one of the great ancestors of our faith, she laughed at the absurdity of the promise she would have a child upon whose shoulders the future of the nation would rest.

*"Kings of people shall come from her"* was the promise (Gen 17: 16b)

She did not have unquestioning confidence in God's promise. Her faith was shaky at best!

She was laughing at the absurdity of the strangers' promise, it was well beyond the limits of possibility!

Laughing that the promise, and its implied leadership, could emerge from such an absurd improbability.

We laugh with embarrassment, because like Sarah, this all-important ancestor in the story of faith, our own faith is not always confident and secure.

Two hundred years later, Matthew's story about Jesus' raising the dead and instantly healing lepers and restoring sight to the blind is also set in absurd improbability and raises lots of questions. But tucked into that text, 50 or 60 years after Jesus' death, is a political statement that clues us in to what it is going on.

*'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd'*

We've heard before how the use of 'shepherd', especially in the Hebrew scriptures, usually refers to kings and rulers – *leaders who have a duty of care*. This story too is about leadership. To say the people were like sheep without a shepherd was a criticism of the current leadership. Let's remember that at this time the people of Judea were living under Roman imperial occupation again with crushing taxes and widening economic inequality, where the ordinary

people were often one harvest away from catastrophe, and where religious leaders were often in collaboration with the imperial system.

It was into this environment that Jesus sends his disciples. They are sent with strict instructions  
not to take any money, and  
not to stay where they are not welcome  
not to display wealth and  
not to judge.

Rather they were to embody compassion, *not to take but to give life and hope: to “proclaim the Good News that the kingdom of heaven has come near”*.

***Their healing work was to participate in the restoration of human dignity.***

It seems to me this is still the work of those of us who proclaim to be followers of Jesus, the one we call the Christ. To work with others where we can ***to restore human dignity where it is lost or in danger.***

Crowds today are still harassed and excluded from participation  
There are still people exhausted by the cost of living and economic insecurity, still  
People, young and old stressed and anxious about climate collapse  
People fleeing from wars they did not create or want  
People denied health and healing through spiraling costs and lack of doctors  
Communities struggling still with the wounds of colonization  
And the list can go on .... We are to face into all of this!

Jesus' instruction to his disciples was not try to fix ***all*** the pain they found but to do whatever they could, where they could, and ***to proclaim the hope*** that there can be another way: ***change is not beyond the limits of possibility.***

We know change in community can begin with small acts of kindness, of courage and hospitality. We saw many examples of this during the covid crisis and see it every time there is a climate related disaster, or a call for food from a helping agency When we welcome 'strangers',

hospitality becomes holy. Abraham and Sarah found this with the strangers, and the disciples experienced it too when it was offered to them with generosity and compassion.

But while this is instructive for us as individuals it is reasonable for us to wonder if this is enough when there is a dearth of compassionate political leadership on the global stage to take us into a healthy future.

Many years ago, at a World Council of Churches Conference I became aware that the Christian church was a global trans-national player on the world stage, and if all its different parts could only find the will and the way to work together, it could be an effective participant with others in making peace through justice, in restoring hope and dignity. Pope Leo seems to be determined to stir the conscience of the church and to demonstrate to the world the church has not abdicated its call to proclaim the good news of peace and justice for humanity and for earth. He is seen to be a compassionate leader.

The temptation for us however, as individuals and as church, (and I include St Matthews), is for us to lose heart and confine our work to what we have always done and know we do reasonably well, or to fall into despair expressed as helplessness and apathy. This is easier rather than to step up to, beyond, the limits of our certainty and 'bother' to offer the leadership and hospitality that holds hope in the face of seemingly impossible limits. Yet, our call is ***to participate in the restoration of human dignity*** (and this does seem a rather impossible task.)

Some of our most important movements for justice-making and the restoration of human dignity today are when people are willing to welcome the people societies treat as strangers and outcasts: refugees, the poor, the LBGQI community, the neuro-diverse, those displaced by war or climate.

*Let us step beyond the limits of our own certainty into a faith that dares to offer unpredictable holy hospitality, and leadership that brings life and hope; leadership that restores health and dignity even if it pushes us beyond the limits of our certainty.*