

Dear LAUMC: Letters to a Church in (Re)formation
You Are a People of 'Yes'
Genesis 17:1-8

Today begins my last sermon series with you. I know better than to think I can predict the future with any certainty, but I'm pretty sure that this is my final sermon series ever; that my career as a preacher is coming to an end too. That's a loss for me. I love standing in this space. I feel like we've been in a five-year conversation together.

We also begin today the four-week season of LAUMC's annual commitment campaign. This is an invitation to you to estimate how much you will give to the church's work in the year that begins on July 1. Your commitment to support this church financially is the information that our budgeting team uses to decide how much ministry the church can do. It's pretty simple, actually: the church will do as much, or as little, as you support.

For me, there's a lovely and slightly ironic symmetry to ending ministry in this way. I spent my *first* five years in ministry talking about money. I was vice president of Pacific School of Religion, responsible for fundraising. My job was to ask people to give to the seminary's work of training pastors for the Church. As I got over my fear of doing that, I learned that asking people to give money to the things they believe in can actually be a gift to them, an opening to a conversation we don't have with each other very often: about aligning our values and our economic lives, how we might live with integrity, wholeness in our hearts *and* our bank accounts. And so, as I am getting ready to leave you, I'm one of the people who's asking you to commit to the future of this church. This church where I know you have already found something that strikes a chord inside of you; a match between what you want for yourself and for the world and the values this church wants for itself. I know that because you're here.

The story we read this morning from Genesis was about Abraham, the founder of faith. Not only Christian faith, but Jewish faith and Muslim faith too. It's part of our origin story. Abraham was the first human being who turned and looked at God and said, 'Yes. I see you. I want to know you.' The story of Abraham consumes many chapters of the Book of Genesis; it's long and complicated and, just like every human life, full of lots of ups and downs. But this piece of the story, about a promise God made to Abraham, is how it all starts.

It was a big promise God made: *You will be the ancestor of many nations. Your children will be a blessing to the whole world. Your descendants will be my people, and I will be their God.*

But here's the fascinating thing: God made that promise to someone for whom the promise was impossible. God didn't promise prolific progeny to some strapping, strong, virile young family, full of promise already. God promised it to an old man, whose wife was equally unfit for parenting. God said 'You will have millions of descendants' to people who had already given up on the possibility of children. So I wonder if Abraham's response was something like, 'Huh. How's that going to work?'

Abraham was 99 years old. Sarah was 90. In a world where having offspring, heirs, was the thing that gave your life meaning, value, staying power, a world where the ancestry you preserved was what gave you *a name*, Abraham and Sarah had no children, no grandchildren.

God *started* with a couple of people whose life had already been beaten down.

They knew what was possible and what was not.

Whoever this was that was promising them a child, this promiser had more faith in the future, more resilience, than they did. If this promise had any legs at all, it was going to have to start with a miracle. Not a spectacular miracle; a small miracle. A personal miracle. A child promised to a couple that had already clearly demonstrated the promise's impossibility.

This is how you know it's God speaking: God's promises are always outside all the bounds of our control, beyond our reason, our ability to predict. Two thousand years after Abraham lived, the Apostle Paul said, 'God is still promising new life to us who know death. God is still calling into existence things that do not yet exist.' Two thousand years after that statement, we still live in a world where God is making promises that surprise us, about goodness we don't deserve and can't manufacture ourselves.

God still keeps those promises.

I have two graduate degrees and a lifetime of disappointed expectations, and I still believe this. I know, just like you do, that not everything I want or pray for fervently will happen. Just like you, I have loved people who shouldn't have died. I have worked hard at things that have failed. I can calculate the likelihood—the unlikelihood—that peace will come soon—to the world or even to my little life. And still...

We are asked every week, every day, not to calculate, but to live with our faces upturned to a God whose promise comes as a question: '*Can you imagine?*'

'Can you imagine?' doesn't ask us to plan or deliver on those promises ourselves. It asks us simply to *hold* God's promises. To hold a hope that looks impossible. Because we need that hope. It's what keeps our faces from turning stern and tight-lipped, our lives from being cynical, grim, unmovable.

I know this for myself. I think you know it too.

To mean anything, to make any difference at all, a promise given has to have a receiver, someone whose action changes because of that promise. Without our response, God's promises have nowhere to land. Those promises need a people to reside in. Are we that people? What do we say when God asks, '*Can you imagine?*'

I think most of us try not to say 'No.' But sometimes, maybe often, our answer is something more like, 'Yes, but.'

Yes, but that's probably not going to happen.

Yes, but look at how the costs will add up.

Yes, but let me tell you how this always goes.

‘Yes, but’ is a powerful answer. It makes us sound sane and sober, prudent, competent, sophisticated. ‘Yes, but’ insists that limits are set by what we can explain or control or predict. ‘Yes, but’ can shut down the promise conversation.

‘Can you imagine?’ Can you let God be God, the maker of miracles, even when you can’t understand the mechanism or figure out how to do it yourself? Is it possible that there is at loose in universe a newness that is more powerful than all the scenarios you can conjure up?

It can feel a little bit embarrassing to say out loud that you believe that impossible things might come to be. But this—this embarrassing ‘yes’—is what faith is.

It means singing songs with words that don’t yet match our experience.
Receiving gifts we’re not altogether sure where they came from or how they got here.
Leaving home and starting journeys that make no sense.

We are the people of a God who makes outrageous, extravagant, impossible-sounding promises. I promise, this God says: someday, people who are poor in everything but faith will sit down for dinner at the same table with people who have more money and privilege than they know what to do with, and they will share everything.

I promise, God says: there is a way of peace in the places where all you see now is conflict. I promise, God says, you can live a good and whole life, a life so full of blessings that it spills over into blessing others.

Can you imagine?

You, people of Los Altos United Methodist Church, you are a people who say ‘Yes’. Yes, we can imagine this. We will imagine together.

Surprising things happen when you say ‘yes’. When I came here five years ago, I could see that immediately: You were a people who said had been saying ‘yes’ for a long time--to launching Hope’s Corner, Compassion Week, Advent Generosity. You’d said ‘yes’ to JustFaith, a path that asked you to open your eyes about justice issues that sometimes live far away from here. You’d said ‘yes’ about a rummage sale that is a ton of work so that the stuff people in Los Altos own can be redistributed to people who need it more. You’d said ‘yes’ about investing in young people.

And so, in a ridiculously exuberant way, counter to every solid piece of advice they give new pastors, I asked you, in the first months of our time together, to hold a promise that I’m still pretty sure came from God.

To imagine a new thing we called a ‘changemaker church’, a path of Christian discipleship that no one else had marked ahead of us, a path we called ‘becoming compassion-driven changemakers like Jesus’;

To invest, substantially, in a new way of living out faith;
To lean into innovation, experimenting with things we’d never tried before;

To trust lay people, and sometimes people with no faith at all, to lead us, teach us what we needed to learn.

To risk something big for something good.

Once again, not for the first time, you said ‘Yes.’

Not ‘Yes, but.’

Just ‘Yes.’

Others, people outside this church, see what God can do because of your ‘yes’.

- Princeton Seminary, that will study what’s happening in the changemaker work here;
- The Lilly Endowment, that has granted \$2.5 million to expand the Changemaker work;
- Multiple Rotary Clubs, that put money and a whole lot of volunteer hours to put solar panels on the Mountain View campus;
- The County of Santa Clara, that is getting ready to consider another \$250,000 investment in the MV campus, to support the community service work that happens there;
- Our United Methodist Conference, that has invested heavily alongside of us in Pastor Sam’s Front Porch ministry.

All over this community, if you mention to people that you are part of LAUMC, they say something like, ‘Oh yeah, that’s that church that does stuff.’

You are the people who are making *that* church. By being here. By supporting, underwriting really, LAUMC’s capacity to be *that church*.

This is kind of a fragile moment for that church. We have not been ourselves for more than two years now. There is more change to come. The answer to the question of *who this church will be* is not a given. God’s promise is new every morning, the Bible says. It’s new this morning too.

Can you imagine that LAUMC is on a different path from the decline that we have come to expect for every church?

Can you imagine that the best, most fruitful days of this church are still ahead of it?

Can you imagine that you are part of a promise that God has made to this whole community?

Your answer matters. This church’s ‘Yes’ to God’s promise is made out of your ‘yes’, and yours, and yours.

Can you imagine?