

God's Other Name
Genesis 18:9-15; 21:1-7
Rev. Dan Schumacher

There once was a seventy-two year old Baptist preacher named Charles McCoy. McCoy was pastoring a Baptist church in Oyster Bay, New York, when at age seventy-two he was mandated by his denomination to retire. A lifelong bachelor, he had cared for his mother for as long as she lived. In his spare time he had earned seven university degrees, including two Ph.D.'s – one from Dartmouth, the other from Columbia.

But now at age seventy-two, he was being forced to retire from ministry.

He was depressed. "I just lay on my bed thinking that my life's over, and I haven't really done anything yet. I've been pastor of this church for so many years and nobody really wants me much – what have I done for Christ?" he asked himself. "I've spent an awful lot of time working for degrees, but what does that count for? I haven't won very many to the Lord."

A week or so later, McCoy met a Christian pastor from India, and on impulse asked him to preach in his church. After the service, the Indian brother asked him matter-of-factly to return the favor. Since he had preached for McCoy, would McCoy come to India and preach for him? McCoy told him that he was going to have to retire and move to a home for the elderly down in Florida. But the Indian pastor insisted, informing McCoy that where he came from, people respected a man when his hair turns white. Would he come?

McCoy thought and prayed about it and decided he would. The members of his church were aghast. Dire predictions were made. The young chairman of his board of deacons summed up the attitude of the congregation when he asked, "What if you die in India?" McCoy told them that he reckoned, "it's just as close to heaven from there as it is from here."

So McCoy sold most of his belongings, put what was left in a trunk, and booked a one-way ticket to India – his first trip ever out of the United States at age seventy-two!

When he arrived in Bombay, he discovered to his horror that his trunk was lost. All he had were the clothes on his back, his wallet, his passport, and the address of the missionaries in Bombay he had clipped from a missionary magazine when he left.

He asked for directions, got on a street car and headed for their house. When he got there, he discovered that while he was on the streetcar his wallet and passport had been stolen! He went to the missionaries who welcomed him in, but who told him that the pastor who had invited him to come to India was still in the U.S. and would probably remain there indefinitely.

What was he going to do now? they wanted to know.

Unperturbed, McCoy told them he had come to preach and that he would try to make an appointment with the mayor of Bombay. They warned him that the mayor was very busy and important and that in all the years they had been missionaries there, they had never succeeded in getting an appointment with him.

Nevertheless, McCoy set out for the mayor's office the next day — and he got in! When the Mayor saw McCoy's business card, listing all his degrees, he reasoned that McCoy must not be merely a Christian pastor, but someone much more important. Not only did he get an appointment, but the mayor held a tea in his honor, attended by all of the big officials in Bombay! Old Dr. McCoy was able to preach to these leaders for half an hour. Among them was the director of India's West Point, the National Defense Academy at Poona. He was so impressed at what he heard that he invited McCoy to preach there. (Ben Patterson, "Keep on Laughing" a sermon on Genesis 18, 1989)

Thus was launched, *at age seventy-two*, a brand new, sixteen year ministry for Dr. Charles McCoy.

Sometimes God's other name is "Surprise!"

The great preacher, Fred Craddock, died a few years ago now. In his later years, he was fond of saying, "When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late twenties, I wanted to be a good preacher. Now that I am older, I want more than anything else to be a Christian. To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, to serve faithfully, and leave everything else to God."

Maybe you know a little bit about Fred. Maybe you don't. But as faithful and gentle and devoted a minister as Fred was, he did not grow up with a Christian father. In fact, he says:

"My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, 'I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it all? Another name, another pledge.' That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, 'There's one now, sic him, get him, get him,' and my father would say the same thing: 'The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge.' I guess I heard it a thousand times," said Craddock.

"One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, 'It's too late.' They put in a metal tube, and X rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat.

I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story," says Craddock.

"He wrote: 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.'

I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?'

And he wrote, 'I was wrong' (*Craddock Stories*, 14).

Sometimes God's other name is "Surprise."

Let me tell you another one:

Abe and Sarah were already getting on up in years when the LORD showed up and told them to head out for a new place — a land they didn't know among people they didn't know.

Sarah had been barren — unable to produce any children. Imagine, if you can, how difficult it must have been to watch all of the family around her bear and raise child after child, painfully realizing more and more with each passing day that there would be no one to carry on the family name. Abe and Sarah were quite literally, the end of the line.

But where others see an end, God often sees a new beginning. You see, the LORD told them to go, but the LORD also promised them that they would be the start of a new nation. God had called Abe and Sarah not only *from* something, but *to* something.

And so, they had a choice to make. Abe and Sarah could stay in the safety of Har'an and remain barren or they could take the risk of going, of striking out to an unknown land and an unknown people, but with a renewed hope in the future of their line.

We have to remember that travel in that day is not like travel today. Sure, you get on I-25 and head toward Denver, and you're taking your life in your hands. But to journey in Abe's day, to strike out on one's own was a gamble at best, and almost always led to a certain and unavoidable demise.

Family, you see, offered protection — protection from thieves, protection from marauders, protection from the elements, protection from wild animals, and protection from hunger.

But no matter how much family can protect you, it cannot protect you from being barren.

Is there a more apt metaphor for a hopeless humanity than barrenness? When speaking of barrenness, Walter Brueggemann notes, “There is no foreseeable future. There is no human power to invent a future.” It is a hopeless scenario.

When weighed in that way, to leave all that was familiar and safe in pursuit of an unknown and uncertain hope begins to look like a reasonable wager to make.

So Abe and Sarah went — hoping that their journey would not only bring them into the land God had promised, but more importantly, into the *offspring* God had promised.

Well, the years passed and the already-flirting-with-being-too-old-to-have-children couple grew even older into a waaayyy-past-being-able-to-have-children-couple.

The heat of the day brought Abe to the edge of a nap. As he rested in the shade at the entrance of his tent, three mysterious men approached. Who knows if it was the heat or the drowsiness in his eyes, but when Abe looked up, what he saw in these three figures was the LORD — the very one who had called him to this unfamiliar land.

He ran out to meet them and begged them to rest in the shade of the tree. He brought water to wash their feet. He ran into the tent, and told Sarah to get busy rolling out biscuits (which wouldn’t fly in my house). He ran and pulled a calf from the herd and had a servant prepare it. He gathered butter and milk, and before you knew it he had laid out a feast in the shade of those old oak trees.

The mysterious figures ate, but then got to the real reason why they were there. “Where is your wife, Sarah?” they asked.

She was eavesdropping at the entrance of the tent, curious what all the fuss was about.

“There in the tent,” said Abe.

Then one of the three said: “I will return in due time, and your wife will have a son.”

Sarah, hearing those words, snickered to herself. The idea of it all! Would she have one foot in the grave and one foot in the maternity ward? She knew that she was well passed her birthing years. Women don’t suspect these things; they *know* these things.

Besides this was a story she had heard before — about 24 years before. Now she was in her nineties... her *nineties*! So *she laughed to herself* as she thought, “After I am worn out and my husband is old, will I now have pleasure?”

So she laughed to herself and her laugh was perhaps that of a cynic — one who had given up on hope.

She still had her hand over her mouth when the man outside spoke again, “Why did Sarah laugh? ...Is anything too wonderful – too *surprising* – for the LORD?”

And with that, the strangers left – and we are left to wonder how God might choose *surprise* us.

More time passed, but the LORD did do for Sarah as had been promised. She became pregnant and bore a son. They named him “Isaac,” which means laughter. And Sarah said, “God has brought *laughter* for me; and everyone who hears about my situation, will laugh with me!”

This time, her laughter wasn’t that of a cynic, but of one who had experienced the pure bliss – the pure joy – of God’s other name.

One last story:

Nearly one hundred and forty-eight years ago, a little congregation was founded in a pioneer town that had sprouted up because of a gold rush. A couple of other churches were under way, but this small group of people believed that the city needed their unique witness: a belief in Bible freedom (to reach one’s own interpretations of scripture), soul freedom (that each person must claim their faith for themselves), church freedom (that the local congregation ought to move and act under its own discretion), and religious freedom (that there ought to always be a clear separation between church and state).

The early years were tough on that little church – multiple pastors in a short time and every time they thought they might have a standing committee, someone else moved on, leaving yet another void. It was a transient town and the young church felt the pains of it. But they persisted – not knowing, but *hoping* in God’s provision.

In 1890, they erected a sanctuary – a place devoted to the worship of God. As they gained stability they also gained ministries. They were a downtown church in a transient town and so there were always those in need around them. For a time, they adopted a refugee family. For a time, they hosted the town’s soup kitchen in their fellowship hall. For a time, they joined with the other downtown churches to address the pressing needs of the homeless and at risk families in the community.

They were led by the saints whose names still echo off of the church’s walls. In fact if you close your eyes, I bet you can still see those saints – saints like, Ward and ‘Ma’ Hurlburt, Dempsey Currie, Bardie Chambon, Gary Cobb, Paul Pack, Gene and Dorothy Hanson, Bill Baker, Joe Wells – saints who had “builted it better than they knew.” It was a lovely church, that strove to be loving and faithful in all it did.

But the years passed and the world outside the church changed.

One day, the old church looked up and around at itself and realized that there was lot more white hair than there used to be and a lot fewer children running up and down the aisles. It was a trend that was happening all over the nation, but that didn't make it feel any less personal to the old, aging church.

What would happen to it in ten years? Twenty years? Thirty? Would there be anyone to pass the stories on to? Would there be anyone left who had healthy enough knees to walk up the steps to the pulpit to read the morning's scripture? Would this be the last generation of the church? *Is this what it feels like to be barren?*

Well – that church is a little bit older now than Abraham and Sarah were when they had Isaac, but God's other name is still Surprise.

The question today, isn't, "Can God really revive this old church?"

The *real* question is: "Do you really want to set put trust in a God who promises babies to 90-year old women? Women who have one foot in the grave and one foot in the maternity ward?"

If you do – if you believe that there really is nothing too surprising for the LORD – well, then can't you also trust that God is not through with us yet?

First Baptist Church: the attendance is older, the work is harder, the faces are wrinklier than they used to be, but we are not a people without hope. Because we worship a God who has done far stranger things than bring new life to an aging congregation. We worship a God who sees new beginnings where others can only see endings. We worship a God whose other name is Surprise!

When Sarah heard those words through the opening of the tent, she said, "Surely, you can't be serious!!"

God said, "I am serious. And don't call me Shirley."

God's other name is Surprise, and that is good news for all who choose hope!

Amen.