

Aging with Hope and Wonder

BY TERRY THOMAS PRIMER

Longfellow wrote that “age is opportunity, no less than youth.” While television, radio, and print media champion the young as models of vision, vigor, and imagination, Scripture portrays quite another story. Many men and women, chosen by God to help move forward the divine-human story, were senior citizens.

Barry, born in 1910, came from a struggling immigrant family.¹ Fortunately, his keen mind earned him a scholarship from a fine state university in the midst of the Great Depression. Following college, he completed a law degree from New York University. Returning to his home town, he developed a reputation as an honest, impartial arbitrator of the law and, over time, was appointed to increasingly more prestigious state and federal court positions. In retirement, Barry began a career in philanthropy, endowing his alma mater with scholarships and contributing to his favorite community charities and causes. Now in his nineties, although physically diminished, he is known for his excellent memory, sharp mind, and generous nature. Each fall he eagerly waits to meet the young men and women who are recipients of the scholarship established in his name.

Frank, who is seventy-five, was by every report a successful businessman in New York City. For many years he managed a thriving fish trade for local restaurants and markets, but he always yearned for something more, to make a difference in this world. After twenty-five years in business, he retired, earned a master's degree in psychotherapy from Yeshiva University and became a family counselor for a social service agency spe-

cializing in services to troubled youth. Frank grew up in a tough neighborhood, and identified with the scrappy young men who had lost their way. Although old enough to be a grandfather to his clients, he loved his work and his clients appreciated his no-nonsense but loving guidance. The onset of Parkinson's disease convinced Frank and his wife to move into a full-service retirement community. Although no longer in private practice, Frank is an unofficial member of the Resident Services team, seeking out troubled senior adults who need a listening ear, and offering his expertise gratis.

I am convinced that Lillian may never retire. In 1945, she was one of only a handful of African-American women to earn a Ph.D. from a distinguished university. A fervent believer in the value of education, she advocated its free and open access for all citizens. Over her long career she served as an educational advisor to several presidents. In her retirement, she serves on many national, state, and local boards. At eighty-four she is still highly sought after and rarely turns down a speaking engagement. In the 1980s, she was ordained to the gospel ministry and the words of Jesus will be on her lips long after she is unable to travel.

“AGE IS OPPORTUNITY”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that “age is opportunity, no less than youth,” and each of these three and many others have taken advantage of the “seventy years or perhaps eighty, if we are strong,” as allotted by the Psalmist, to make a contribution to this world (Psalm 90:10). Though today television, radio, and print media champion the young as models of vision, vigor, and imagination, as if these were the only people worthy of notice, the Bible portrays quite another story. Many key characters, chosen by God to move forward the divine-human story, were senior citizens many years past their prime even according to our standards. Noah was 600 years old when told to build the ark before the flooding of the world; Joseph was 110 when he died; Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was described as “getting on in years” (Matthew 1:18); and Anna, the prophetess, was eighty-four when she encountered the baby Jesus. Age is revered in Scripture as a sign of favor; the ancient patriarchs and matriarchs named in the genealogies are esteemed for their long life and wisdom. We admire the enthusiasm and freshness of youth, which bubbles over like champagne; but from the elderly we can gain deep wisdom, which has been aged in the casks of experience, distilled by optimism and death, and now embodies the fullness of life. Perhaps only those accustomed to watching the mysterious ways of God can recognize the Almighty's fingerprints on the pages of time and on a life.

OLD-FASHIONED HOSPITALITY

In Genesis 18, two senior adults receive God's revelation regarding Issac, the promised child and the future of Israel. Chapter 17 describes

Abraham as 100 years old and his wife, Sarah, is ten years his junior at age ninety. Stumbling their way toward righteous, these two imperfect but faithful people are well along in years. The biblical writer tips off the reader that it is God who is coming to visit on this hot, dry, dusty day, but apparently Abraham doesn't know this. Three travelers arrive suddenly, perhaps awakening Abraham as he rests in the shade of his tent. He responds with magnificent hospitality, bowing low and addressing one as "my Lord." (The word "Lord" is not the usual one for God but a title to address a person of superior rank.) Abraham bids the three not to pass him by, but to let their servant Abraham offer the shade of his tree, a little water for their hot, tired feet and a small morsel of bread to refresh them. The graciousness of their host persuades the three strangers to tarry awhile in his company.

With modest understatement, Abraham begs his travelers to accept his humble hospitality and then begins working on a feast fit for royalty. He asks Sarah to prepare bread using the choicest flour—and not just a loaf or two. Today, two loaves of bread require approximately 5-6 cups of flour. In contrast, Abraham asks his wife to prepare the equivalent of 28 cups of flour, and then he moves on to supervise the selection of the calf to be slaughtered and prepared. In this culture, serving meat was considered a rare delicacy, a costly sacrifice, and a sign of deep respect. With the meal in preparation, Abraham offers his visitors an appetizer of curds and milk, also an indication of his high esteem for his guests, since milk products were regarded as sources of vitality, possessing curative powers. When the meal is ready, Abraham personally serves his guests in the shade of the tree, waits while they eat, and attends them as a servant.

LAUGHING AT GOD

Up to this point, the biblical narrative has described the generous hospitality of Abraham to

three traveling strangers, but in Genesis 18:9 the story shifts direction and reveals God's presence. One of the three heavenly visitors asks, "Where is your wife Sarah?" "There, in the tent," answers Abraham. Although hidden from view, Sarah moves to center stage. One of the three divine visitors, now identified as God, speaks, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (18:10). And Sarah, who is listening, laughs.

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Was it a giggle of nervousness, a guffaw of incredulity, a chuckle of delight or perhaps a snort of impossibility? I wonder. Some months ago, I told this story to a group of residents gathered for chapel in a nursing home in which the average age is ninety. When I finished reading the Bible story, I asked the women there, "Would you like to be pregnant?" You should have heard the giggles. The women all looked at themselves and then at one another. In their faces you could see memories of pregnancy,

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childbirth, and two-year-olds running wild. Then, as they looked at themselves in wheelchairs and with walkers, they laughed deep throaty chuckles of relief. Not a single one of them volunteered to become a mother again.

We are not given a description of Sarah's laugh, but the text reminds us that Abraham and Sarah were

candidates for gracious retirement, many years past childbearing and toddler-chasing age. "After I have grown old, and my husband is old," Sarah wonders to herself, "shall I have pleasure?" (18:12). There is a word play in the text and one could translate the passage this way: "Even though I am withered, shall I become ripe again?" In the prediction and in the overhearing of Sarah's thoughts and words, the power of God is revealed. God asks Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is there anything too difficult for me?" Many years later the angel Gabriel will reassure Mary, another woman who is contemplating the impossible, with a strikingly similar phrase: "Is anything too difficult for God?" (Matthew 1:27).

God's question and Sarah's response reveal the Lord's faithfulness and Sarah's doubt. Why did she laugh? Because she is old and children are born to the young. Her incredulity is matched by the raucous laughter of Abraham earlier, in chapter 17, in which the covenant between God and Abraham is renewed and symbolized with a change in name. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah, which includes a special blessing for her: "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" (17:16). And in the very next verse, Genesis records, "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?'" Frankly, Sarah's laughter is modest in comparison, but it does offer God an opportunity to repeat that this time next year, she will be the mother of a son. However they

laughed, with guffaws, deep chuckles, giggles, or snorts of delight, God is patient and faithful.

RESPONDING IN HOPE

This story of heavenly visitation is the basis for the name Isaac, meaning laughter, and I wonder what Abraham and Sarah said to one another after the three strangers went on their way. A gloriously impossible promise was reaffirmed to them, a son will be born, but on this occasion it will not be by the Holy Spirit. Isaac's birth requires these two to act in faith. In my mind's eye I can see them, old beyond their years, getting undressed for the night as the stars begin to twinkle. Slipping into bed, they kiss, holding each other tightly—and I bet they laughed, hoping against hope that the heavenly visitors are right, that there is nothing too difficult for God.

What about us? We are not the matriarchs and patriarchs of nations who have entertained angels. But perhaps this is an invitation for us to continue to live, love, and hope, watching for God in unexpected places. Abraham's spontaneous hospitality provides the setting for a revelation from God who is patient with our laughter, doubt, and disbelief. Scripture reminds us that no one is ever too old to receive fresh promises from God. Trust, therefore, in the Almighty, the Faithful One, and continue to hope. For hope ignites life, laughter, and generosity, even in the twilight of one's life.²

NOTES

1 "Barry," "Frank," and "Lillian" are not their real names, but their stories are true.

2 Nahum M. Sarna, ed., *Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 130.



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