

A dictionary definition of ugly is as follows: very unattractive or unpleasant to look at, offensive to the sense of beauty, displeasing in appearance.

We also know that ugly can refer to situations that are just not great. There's a lot of ugly behaviour in our Bible – both Old and New Testaments. There's slavery, there's murder, infidelity, abuse, human sacrifice, incest, pride, dishonesty, gossip, arrogance, mistreatment of widows, orphans and immigrants, children, women and slaves. Some of the ugliness is interpreted thus because of cultural differences. Granted, now a days it is frowned upon to own slaves – but it wasn't long ago that owning a slave was legal in parts of the United States. But some of the ugliness in the Bible is just plain awful and done to sisters and brothers in the faith. But this is not the kind of ugly I mean.

To ugly cry is not this gentle daub at the eye lest our mascara smear kind of crying but is full-on weeping and wailing – blotchy face and all. Ugly crying happens when all seems lost when it feels as if there is no hope. There is no pretense, there is no ulterior motive, there is no saving face, there is just the moment – the grief, the fear, the loss.

I imagine Hannah in the temple ugly crying her prayers to God – and Eli mistaking her for drunk. I imagine Job and his wife, on hearing of the death of their children, ugly crying. I imagine the sisters Mary and Martha weeping by the tomb of their brother, Lazarus and the parents of the little girl who lay dead on her bed before Jesus came and raised her up likely were ugly crying.

Turns out, while ugly crying isn't all that pretty to look at or to even experience – in the eyes of God, ugly crying can lay the spirit bare. Paul, in Romans 8:26 reminds us that in our weakness; the SPIRIT intercedes to the LORD for us with sighs too deep for words. And God hears our cry and knows it intimately. This kind of laying our lives bare before God is freeing and cathartic and opens our hearts and souls to the Spirit of God moving in us because all barriers to God within us have been broken down. We are utterly and completely vulnerable before God and God holds us so tenderly.

The lectionary texts this week all share this same theme. While none of the stories are talking about ugly crying, they do tell of moments, situations, events when all personal barriers are down, and the people are in that place where they feel like God's promises are so out of reach that there is no hope anymore. I like to say that they are in a place of "ugly waiting" where waiting any longer for God's promises to come true seems foolish and futile... waiting for God's goodness that seems too long in coming – waiting and perhaps wailing in despair.

A long time ago, God spoke to a childless couple in the middle east and promised to give them blessings – land, children, descendants more than the stars of the sky – and to make their names great – so that they could be a blessing too. The years passed, Sarah and Abraham became seniors – octogenarians in fact – and still no baby.

Back then, and still in some places today, a woman's worth in all places was intimately tied with her fertility. Sarah knew the promise that God had given them – descendants more than the stars of the sky – and longed and looked for and hoped for the day when that would begin – but the day never came, and her body aged.

Waiting years and years and then recognizing that perhaps her body wasn't suitable to bear Abraham his promised descendants and offering Hagar must have been really hard. I imagine there was a lot of pain

involved with her decision and even more pain upon discovering Hagar was worthy of bearing Abraham's son – and she, Sarah, wasn't.

And then Abraham greeted three guests. And they feasted on a meal prepared by Sarah under the oaks of Mamre. (These three guests are often interpreted as a visit from God – the Trinity). And as they were eating the guests promised Abraham that they would return in a year and when they returned, Sarah would have borne a child.

Sarah, of course, was eavesdropping, and chuckled to herself, "Ya right. I've waited and waited and now I am an old woman – my fertile years are over and what has waiting gained me? Nothing but heartache, and scorn."

I think that we're quick to judge Sarah's laughter. After all, we know the end of the story...but put yourself in her place. Her laughter was not denial – it was ironic, it was sadness, it was maybe even a bit of wonder, it was doubt and questioning and in no way was it an insult to God. In fact, the same kind of miraculous statement was made years later by an angel to a very young woman who responded much the same as Sarah did to the possibility of an impossible son. "How can this be?"

To Sarah's delight she bore a son and Abraham named him Isaac which means, "laughter". We read in Genesis 21:5 that "Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Sarah's ugly waiting and completely genuine sardonic laughter was turned to the tired laughter of a new mother delighting in the mystery and the wonder of this miracle in her arms. This laughter is a blessing – like a refreshing rain on parched land. When we don't know the words for the feelings of profound love and delight when we finally see God's kingdom come alive right before our eyes then we laugh this laughter. Pure unglamorous unadulterated real beautiful genuine ugly laughter.

We could go on with the story God did not forget Sarah. God heard the depths of her cry and answered in impossible ways.

Many years later the vast number and strength of Sarah's descendants intimidated a king. They were forced into slavery, abused and killed. When they were freed from slavery Moses led them towards the wilderness. They were tired, but their captors kept them running – until they reached the sea. What were they going to do? The sea was on the one hand – their slave masters on the other.

And in some miraculous way their cries were heard, and a way was made through the water – and the people walked on dry land to safety.

And they keep on walking...with their flocks and their herds and all their possessions...until they could go no farther without water. But the water that they found was bitter. And by some miraculous way, their cries to God were heard again and the water was made drinkable...and they drank.

And then they had no food. And by some miraculous way, their cries to God were heard again and food fell from the sky – bread from heaven, manna. And they ate.

And then an army invaded them – And by some miraculous way, their cries to God were heard and they fought and were spared.

And then they reached a mountain. A special mountain ...a holy mountain. And there they camped – at the foot of Mount Sinai and they were so tired. And there in the wilderness, so long ago, God spoke a message to Moses. God said:

Exodus 19:2-8

“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: <sup>4</sup>You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup>Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup>but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

<sup>7</sup>So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. They said in one voice: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

We know what happened to God’s people wandering in the desert so long ago. Even after they promised to follow the LORD’s commandments, they still messed up. There was a whole lot of complaining, much griping, mistrust, betrayal, and it certainly wasn’t easy for Moses and the other leaders. There were spies, and battles and walls tumbling down. And snakes and pits opening and lots of lots tired and achy feet.

And when they got to where they’re going they messed things up badly, prophets, kings, widows, priests and exile...and still there was that promise: “if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

I can just hear the cries of the people – crying out to God when they were captured and sent into exile – “How long, Oh Lord?” Yes, we messed up! Yes, we were impatient with you! Forgive us, Oh LORD! How LONG?”

And then when the time was most dark and all seemed lost, a voice spoke, “Greetings, favoured one. Do not be afraid.” And another answered in wonder and likely a little skepticism, “How can this be? And then, “Let it be with me just as you’ve said.”

We could go on with this story – but you all know it so well. Suffice it to say that God did not forget the people of Israel – nay, the whole world. In a time of deep deep darkness – when all seemed lost, God remembered the promise made, God heard the people’s cry and answered.

One more story. 32 or so odd years later, we read in Matthew 10: 1-14 Jesus sent out his 12 disciples with God’s power over unclean spirits, to cure every disease and sickness and even raise the dead. He sent them out to the house of Israel – Sarah’s descendants – to proclaim that “The Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” And he instructed them to give freely, expecting no money in return.

The 12 went out and did this and many came to know the way of Jesus. Many homes and communities were blessed with shalom – wholeness – as they welcomed the message the disciples brought.

Jesus mentioned, however, that some homes and communities would not welcome the disciples. Instead of insisting, pleading, fighting with or trying to convince people that just refused to be convinced, the disciples were instructed to shake the dust off their feet as they left; to leave there what belonged there; to leave the community or the household's problems with them – and not take it onto themselves. I'm sure when the disciples returned to inform Jesus of their adventures, their frustration with their sisters and brothers in these houses or communities was palpable.

Friends, we don't know God's timing – we don't know any of it – but what I do know is that our God wants us to be our genuine selves – to bring all that we are and all that we have – be it hopelessness, be it impatience, be it ugly-crying and hopeless wailing. It is God's and God can do and will do with you surprising and wonderful things.

Now, we probably haven't had the same experiences as Sarah or the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness, or even Jesus and the disciples telling unbending people about the good news, but we've had some tough time of ugly waiting too.

We hurt and been hurt, we have been hungry – and we still hunger, maybe not for food – but for hope, for courage, for learning, even for excitement and for joy. We have loved and betrayed, we have laughed and wailed and sung with joy in the morning. We have waited so long for God's goodness and been distraught at the seeming long days of hopelessness and unfulfilled promises. We have journeyed for many years in the company of our beloved community – headed towards a place known only to God. And many of us are so tired and discouraged in our waiting.

But here's the deal. The LORD loves tired people... I may even speak the truth that out of all the people in the Bible – the ones that shone brightest in the glory of God were people that were so very very tired of waiting for God's promises to come. Tired of injustice, tired of being overlooked by those in power, tired of insincere worship, tired of running for their lives from fellow believers, tired of waiting to see what the LORD has in store. And when they prayed or praised or even wept they didn't hold back. They asked questions, they let the LORD know their fears and their doubts – they suffered greatly – some even at the hands of their sisters and brother - and did not hold any of this back from God.

And God did not and is not and will not put any to shame. God wants your ugly tears – your ugly waiting your ugly praise. God wants your tears, your cries, your groans, your loud bursts of laughter, your wrestling, your questions, and your doubts. God wants YOU! All of you; you unglamorous, exhausted, broken, ugly, and beautiful you.

There is nothing about this that can shame us because we know that in our times of discouragement, or waiting for what the LORD will do next, even in our impatience and our suffering we are developing passionate patience, and that patience in turn is building our character and keeping us alert for whatever God will do next.

In our times of deep grief or mourning or even suffering for the sake of the kingdom, while we wait God's promises to come to fruition – in these times we have hope because GOD's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Friends. There is a long history in our bible of ugly-crying and ugly-waiting – deep real people who waited for what the LORD was going to do – and sometimes they even died before God's promises were realized. Do not be discouraged. Hold to hope. God is making beautiful things. Can you not perceive it?