"When Laughter Meets Calling", A Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, June 14, 2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed … The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."(Genesis 18:9-15)

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves… When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt. 10:16,19)

We gather here this morning at the start of the beautiful summer season here in the Finger Lakes. The church calls this time the Season after Pentecost, or Ordinary Time, our longest liturgical season of the year. It is the season in which our lectionary focuses us on the nuts and bolts of what it means to be followers of Jesus. We need that focus as the world around us continues to be trying and stressful. The chaos of our national political scene wears everyone down with its daily dose of crises, real and manufactured. The world feels more dangerous than it has in decades, with wars in Iran and Ukraine, and public health crises at home and abroad, and the steady rise in inflation with the price of gas and food continuing their upward trajectory. Cynicism and suspicion mark too much of our common life, with people on different sides of the political spectrum struggling to understand or even tolerate one another. And here at St. Mark's, we've had our own season of wrestling — working through conflict, healing old wounds, and now stepping into a search process that brings both excitement and apprehension. The future feels hopeful, but also a little cloudy.

Our readings today offer up some wonderful stories to ground us in these peculiar times. Sarah's encounter with the strangers who visited her tent by the Oaks of Mamre reminding her of God's promise to give her a son, a promise she had long since given up on as she was in her 100th year. And Jesus commissioning his twelve disciples in which he warns them of the challenges they will face as they do the work he is calling them to do. We are not unlike our ancestors whom Jesus described as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." And we are not unlike Sarah, who laughed when she heard God's promise spoken aloud — laughed because she was tired, because hope had worn thin, because she could not imagine that God still had something new in store for her. After all, she and Abraham had so given up on hope for a son, that they had given her slave girl Hagar to Abraham and she bore Ishmael to him, which they had thought might be the way God's promise would be fulfilled. Sarah's laughter wasn't faithlessness; it was the honest reaction of someone who had been waiting a very long time and made peace with what she thought was a promise revised.

Many congregations in transition know that feeling. After a year of hard conversations and slow healing, looking at a search process that may well take time and require some serious work, it can be difficult to believe that God still has promises for us. But Sarah's story reminds us that God's faithfulness does not depend on our optimism in any given moment. God keeps working even when we cannot yet imagine how. Sarah laughed — and God blessed her anyway. Her laughter became the doorway to new life.

Into that same weary, uncertain world, Jesus sends out the twelve. He doesn't send them to mountaintop caves to pray or to create doctrinal statements. He sends them to do ministry — real, active, compassionate ministry: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." He turns disciples — followers — into apostles, ones who are sent into the world with a significant job description.

And the group he sends is hardly uniform. This was a rag tag bunch of fisherfolk, merchants, a tax collector and assorted other nondescript citizens of Galilee and environs. Matthew the tax collector, stands shoulder to shoulder with Simon the Zealot. As a Zealot, Simon would have been active in the anti-Roman political activity of the Jewish people of his day. Matthew, a tax collector, was one who worked for the Roman government, indeed helped them in their work of taxing the Jewish minority. Politically, they could not have been farther apart. Notwithstanding those political differences, when it came to doing the work that Jesus called them to do, Matthew and Simon were united. When Jesus sends them, their differences do not disqualify them, nor do they adversely impact their carrying out the ministry. A person's willingness to serve was more important to Jesus than credentials of any kind.

In our own divided world — conservatives and progressives, Republicans and Democrats, mainstream Christians and Christian nationalists — Matthew and Simon stand as a reminder that Jesus expects his followers to put compassion before ideology. The ministry to those Jesus called "the least of these" comes first. The healing comes first. The care of the vulnerable comes first.

And that ministry is still needed today. Some among us are literally called to cure the sick — doctors, nurses, therapists, social workers, all those in the caring professions. But all of us are called to be reconcilers in a conflict-ridden world, to approach even the hot-button issues of our day from the vantage point of how they affect the most vulnerable among us. We are called to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, honor the dignity of every person, and practice the radical hospitality that Sarah and Abraham and Jesus modeled.

When Jesus tells the apostles to "raise the dead," he is not only talking about a Lazarus type of resuscitation. He is pointing them to a different kind of deadness. We all know people who feel dead inside — spiritually, emotionally, or psychologically. Those who are worn down and exhausted by the trials and tribulations of life and feel incapable of pulling themselves out of the funk into which they have fallen. People who are dead have an inbred fear of change. Sometimes we are those people. But embracing our Christian calling generates energy and a willingness to embrace new things. It brings us alive. People who are alive are willing to try something different and welcome change. As a colleague of mine once said - "a rut is a grave with the ends knocked out." Pulling ourselves and others out of our comfortable ruts and trying to make a difference in the world is its own form of raising the dead.

And when Jesus tells them to "cleanse the lepers," he is calling them to draw near to those who are marginalized or cast aside. Our society still has its lepers: the homeless, the mentally ill, the extremely poor, the aged and infirm, the LGBTQ community — especially our transgender siblings who are being targeted across the country — immigrants and refugees, people of color, those who are physically or mentally challenged. To do the work of cleansing the lepers today we need to practice radical hospitality, welcoming absolutely everyone into our church and our secular society and standing up and speaking out when any institution, be it the church or the government falls short of the inclusiveness and hospitality and compassion that Jesus' entire ministry modeled. As apostles sent into our world to continue the ministry of the Risen Christ, we are called to cleanse lepers, and never to participate in creating them.

Finally, Jesus charges them to cast out demons — to resist evil, to confront the forces of darkness that still plague our world: war, gun violence, environmental degradation, poverty, disease. Casting out demons means having the courage to speak for those who have no voice, to call leadership to account and to resist cruelty and corruption, naming the demons as we see them. Casting out demons includes practicing faithful stewardship of the earth and its resources. Last week we were each reminded "remember your baptism" which included a renunciation of Satan and all the evil forces of the world and a promise to resist evil in all its forms. This is not work for the faint hearted by any means but it is the work to which our baptism calls us.

Jesus calls us to some very lofty and noble work, but he is also practical. He warns the apostles that not everyone will receive them well. "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves," he says. Find common ground where you can. And when you cannot, shake the dust from your feet and move on. Don't waste your energy trying to win every argument or trying to convince those who refuse to listen to anything that challenges their worldview. Focus on the ministry of healing and reconciliation, focus on radical hospitality, welcoming strangers into your tent to see what God is bringing to you through them.

And that brings us back to Sarah. She laughed because she thought it was too late for God's promise to her to be realized. Her act of hospitality to three strangers who arrived at her tent brought the hope of a promise yet to be fulfilled, even as she was skeptical about the message they bore. As it turned out, God was not finished with her. And God is not finished with us. We are at a Kairos moment — a special, unique God-given time — when we are called to be bold, to love our neighbors in ways that may feel uncomfortable or even scary, to be voices of compassion and healing in our dangerous and broken world. As we continue forward with the search process, as we imagine a future for this congregation that feels both hopeful and uncertain, we can trust that God's Spirit will give us what we need. "When the moment comes," Jesus says, "the Spirit will tell you what to say."

So we keep our hearts open. We relish this beautiful season in this beautiful part of the world. We listen for the Spirit. We laugh like Sarah, incredulous at the potential of God's promises. And we step forward — like Sarah, like Matthew and Simon, like the apostles — trusting that God is already ahead of us, preparing the way.

Amen.