

The Promise of Progeny

San Francisco Swedenborgian Church

Kimberly M. Hinrichs

August 12, 2001

Gen. 15:1-6; John 11:25-27

I was witness to an annunciation recently. It was a very modern annunciation, much more so than the biblical account of God promising a son to Abraham. It's about Tammy Holicky, a member of our congregation, and a friend of mine. One day a few weeks ago I was sitting on the couch in the children's room after church. All of a sudden Tammy burst into the room and planted herself next to me. She opened up a small book in her hand and showed me a photograph that had been tucked into it. It was a gray image printed on flimsy thermal fax paper. It contained what looked like two bumpy circles. I caught my breath as I realized what I was looking at. It was a photograph of two fertilized human eggs. These were the two eggs that had been chosen for in vitro fertilization, and which had, just after the photograph was taken, been implanted in Tammy's body. What I was looking at was Tammy's children. Tammy was full of excited and nervous energy to find out whether the four long years she and her husband had spent trying to conceive a child were finally finding their reward. In that bubble of intense hope and expectation, Tammy had been given the promise of progeny.

Offspring is something I think about quite a lot these days because 13 months ago I became a mother myself. I prepared the way for the birth of that child as if Jesus himself were about to enter the world. The promise that I had been given held within it the fulfillment of my life's purpose, or so it seemed. As these 13 months have played out, I have been filled up with overflowing love and devotion for my daughter. I expected that. At times I have also reached acute levels of frustration and anger, which I did not expect. I am still trying to understand what the promise of progeny really means.

I work for our denomination's seminary, the new Swedenborgian House of Studies, or SHS, in Berkeley. One day George Dole, one of the school's professors, remarked that SHS is actually the younger of my two charges. At SHS we are trying to build a new future for our denomination by creating new programs, courses, and experiences for our students. We are hoping that its descendants will multiply and bring the Swedenborgian Church into new levels of growth and vitality. The promise of progeny. Whether we're talking about progeny as real children or as other creations that we set forth into the world, the promise of offspring is one that is very important to all of us. On one level, we are all Abraham yearning to be reassured by God that the promise is still valid.

The importance and power of having offspring can be seen throughout the Bible. Children were important in ancient Israelite culture for many reasons. The extended family was the basic unit of social and economic structure in that time. Children were necessary to maintain the family unit and its place within the society. Children also became the heirs of the family land and thus were essential to the continuing physical and economic survival of the family clan. In the case of the Israelites, offspring were needed

for nation-building, and this is the meaning of God's promise to Abraham. God has made a solemn promise that Abraham will be the father of a great nation and that he will give to his descendants the land of Canaan. On this promise, in fact, rests the unfolding of the entire Old Testament story.

To understand this particular promise fully, it has to be seen in context. This reading is only one of seven times God promises offspring to Abraham. It's no wonder he seems to be getting a little impatient—God has already made the life-altering promise, has already stunned Abraham into a new way of understanding himself and his future. Abraham has gotten himself psyched up for his new role of being the patriarch of Israel, but there is still no child.... And years later: still, no child. Abraham has been thrown into uncertainty and mistrust, for God's very covenant with Abraham rests on his having a child.

That's a little background on the literal level of this Bible passage, but as Swedenborgians we may have a curiosity about what the spiritual sense of the passage indicates too. Swedenborg says that the word "offspring" or "seed" corresponds to love and faith. Thus, when Abraham says, "I continue childless" and "you have given me no offspring," it points toward the condition of living without love and faith in one's life. Conversely, heirs or descendants mean those who have eternal life in the Lord's kingdom, or those who walk on the path of regeneration. Seen through a Swedenborgian lens then, this passage is a question about the nature of our existence. "Lord, where is love and truth?" we might imagine Abraham saying. "All I see around me is falsity." The response is both answer and a promise: Those who love God and love the neighbor shall have eternal life in the Lord's kingdom. And not only that, but that the goodness and truth which come from the Lord are absolutely immense.

There is a belief that many of us seem to have that the fulfillment of God's promises will bring everlasting happiness. But it's not exactly that easy. In the first place, it is rare indeed to even experience that "a-ha" moment when we realize we are receiving God's word. And then, the truth is that God is not always forthcoming in fulfilling his promises—he certainly took his time with Abraham. The other truth is that when the blessed promise does become real, it is never the end of the story. After God's seven promises of a child to Abraham, Isaac is finally born. But we only have to read a short while after that before Abraham receives another communique from God... and this time it is to *sacrifice* the very son whom Abraham had waited his whole life to bear. And even after that, the promise of building the great nation of Israel came to include wandering for 40 years in the desert, being exiled to Babylon, and even suffering the terrorism in the Holy Land of today. It's a fair question to ask, "are we still living with the promise, God?"

When I found out I was going to have progeny of my own, I, like Abraham, felt like my destiny was being fulfilled. As long as I had a child and a family, all other worldly concerns would fade into secondary importance and I could be assured of forever more turning my energies toward my most important calling. That's true. But the promise hasn't been so easy to live out. It started with Claire's surprisingly violent birth,

and continued on to unrelieved exhaustion, consciousness-stretching frustration, and her greedy imposition on all aspects of my personal freedom. And yet, this was all part of the package. It's just taking me a long time to realize that this was all part of God's promise from the beginning.

I'm getting a sinking suspicion that my work at SHS might go the same direction. For months, those of us who were involved in the decision to move the school to Berkeley have been full of optimism, energetic hope and resolve. Now that our offices are set up and the real work has begun in earnest, I admit to having some moments of feeling immobilized at the sheer number of tasks to be completed. In a stroke of providential irony, the day of my daughter's first birthday-- the day when I could stop at the crest of the mountain and look back to survey the distance I had come on the journey of motherhood-- was the very day the moving trucks arrived from Boston with all of the school's possessions. And I moved from the realm of one promise to the realm of another....

Evidently, the point is not about getting our promises fulfilled. It's not about getting our prayers answered. What counts about God's promises is their continuing status as promise. God has promised us that if we believe in him we will know no end of goodness and truth. We need to live through the startling ups and downs of our lives with the knowledge that we are living in the midst of this promise. The frustration, the fear, the anger: it is all part of the whole.

The awesome thing about a promise is this: it doesn't just change the future; it changes the present. Abraham became a new person when he believed that his destiny was to become the patriarch of Israel. When we believe God's promise, we take into ourselves the character of the promise made, so that who we understand ourselves to be at this moment is one whose future rests in God. Abraham says, "I continue childless." The original Hebrew actually says "I am walking childless." What a difference there would be if instead of saying, "I am walking childless" we were to say "I am walking with the promise." To say, "Even though it has not yet been fulfilled, I am going about my life believing in the promise." What a difference there would be if we were to say, "I am walking with love and faith in my heart."

I come back to the metaphor of pregnancy because it seems like a fitting analogy for living with a promise not yet fulfilled. A pregnant woman is one in whom a promise is gestating. And I'm thinking again about Tammy. She's now in her 14th week of pregnancy with twins. Although the little beings are growing just fine, and happily doing somersaults in Tammy's womb, her doctor has recently placed her on bedrest. I talked with Tammy on Friday, and asked her permission to talk about her this morning. She is trying to keep her spirits up with needlepoint, reading, and Oprah, but there's no question of the difficulty of being confined to one's home. Let us keep her in our prayers this morning. She is living with the promise indeed, but it is not easy. And I don't want to be the first one to tell her, but after the twins are born it's not going to get any easier!

If we believe in God, we will have eternal life. The goodness and truth that faith in God will bring is more numerous than the stars in the sky. This is our promise. Amen.