The collect reminds us that God knows what we need better than we do ourselves. Also that what we want is not always what we need.

Then our first reading provides a perfect example. Abraham and Sarah don’t appear even to be thinking bout having children, as they gave up on that years earlier. Sarah is well beyond chid-bearing age, and Abraham himself would seem to be too old to father a child. They’re certainly not saying anything here about needing a child at this stage. Yet the visit by God ends with their being told that they would have a child within a year.

Just after this pronouncement is one of my favorite exchanges in scripture, and I don’t know why it’s not included in the lectionary along with this reading: Sarah laughs. Right in the face of God, taking these visitors to represent God, she laughs. It’s absurd, she rightly thinks. At least as far as human plans and expectations are concerned.

But it turns out to be exactly what Abraham and Sarah and the Jews of all time, and the world (including all of us) needed. One of the many descendants of Sarah and Abraham would be Jesus, the Nazarene. Just what we needed and didn’t even know it.

God knows our needs before we ask and our ignorance in asking.

Ignorance doesn’t mean stupidity, of course. In fact it’s a really wonderful word to describe how we go through much of life—ignoring the wonder and beauty and purpose in being alive. We tend to overlook—or ignore—everything besides what *we* think is important or valuable. In short, what we think we need.

Today, after I leave here I’m headed to St. John’s Church just off Braker Lane in Austin. There I will celebrate the Holy Eucharist with their Spanish-speaking congregation. We will also baptize two children who will undoubtedly bring to their parents the wonder and joy and frustration and anxiety that Sarah and Abraham are about to experience in their old age.

How many times have we all been absolutely certain of what our children needed, what we needed as their parents? How often, when those hopes weren’t realized, did we discover something about ourselves and our children that we couldn’t have done in any other way?

In my original version of this sermon I was going to trace the story of my path to seminary and beyond and how that began with some dashed hopes and failures. But it’s really not necessary. All of us—whether parents or not—have stories to illustrate how God’s knowledge of us and our needs has brought us to unexpected places, friendships, and revelations, often despite our desires to go in other directions.

I don’t believe that God causes us misery to teach us lessons; that is simply not the kind of loving parent I imagine God to be. At the same time, I believe that nearly always when we find ourselves in difficult, or worse, situations divine influence helps us to learn something that, once again, we could scarcely learn by other means.

Humility seems to be an important ingredient to a happy life. Really basic humility that says, “Maybe I have learned a lot, but I am not God.” And then to be open to discovery of something wonderful. We are so often like Martha—and don’t get me wrong, we do have to get some things done—and fail to recognize the value of being like Mary, listening for God’s voice, even in the midst of hectic and difficult times.

Perhaps it’s because of the baptisms, at least unconsciously, that I have used the words “wonder” and “joy” repeatedly today. If so, it’s because of the prayer we say immediately after the actual baptism. The last words are, “Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.”

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