

**Laughing with Sarah**  
**Genesis 18:1-15, Psalm 126**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**June 14, 2020**

**Call to Worship**

I realized something this week... I realized that I'm not laughing as much as I once did. Are you? Our world is living through such a heavy time... our nation, too... and then you add to that all of the things we're facing in our own lives. "This is no laughing matter!" we could say... and we'd be right. Somehow it feels insensitive and inappropriate to laugh when so many people are suffering. And yet, in our Bible story this morning we find laughter – maybe not the “slip on a banana peel” kind or the kind Jimmy Fallon gets – but laughter, nevertheless. Our call to worship this morning is the 126<sup>th</sup> psalm – words that celebrate the homecoming of God's people from exile in Babylon. Once again, God had delivered them... as he did from slavery in Egypt... once again God had proved himself faithful to his promise to be their God. These words pour out with the laughter that comes with knowing once again the joy of the Lord.

**Psalm 126**

1When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.  
2Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”  
3The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.  
4Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. 5May those who sow in  
tears reap with shouts of joy.  
6Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

**Bible Reading**

**Genesis 18:1-15**

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on— since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” 6And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” 7Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. 9They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” 10Then 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. 11Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” 13 The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ 14 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.” 15 But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

### Sermon

One of the interesting things about this ancient family saga of Abraham and Sarah is that from the very beginning, the promise God gave to them seems always to be at risk.<sup>1</sup> That bright and hopeful future... the promise of generations of descendants, the gift of a good and prosperous land, the chance to be a blessing for the whole world... this promise is repeatedly threatened. Some of you may remember, years ago, Bill Moyers hosted a series of conversations about the Book of Genesis on public television. He gathered a group of very bright people from a variety of disciplines to talk about this great book and its stories. And the conversation about Sarah was especially rich. One of Moyers’ guests imagined Sarah waking up at four in the morning, hearing the bustling noise of Abraham packing. Sarah says,

“What are you doing, Abe?”

“Packing.”

“What for?”

“Well, we’re leaving.”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are we going?”

“Because he told me to.”

“Who’s ‘He’?”

“He didn’t tell me.”

And then he imagined Sarah calling her father: “What am I going to do?” and her father says, “I knew you shouldn’t have married that nut.”<sup>2</sup> Well, between that initial call and today’s reading a lot of wild things have transpired. First, there was a famine which forced Abraham and Sarah to Egypt for food. Then, afraid that Pharaoh will kill him because Sarah was so beautiful, Abraham lied and said Sarah was his sister and she almost got swallowed up into Pharaoh’s harem. God stepped in and rescued Sarah by sending great plagues and soon the family was on the road again. Then Abraham bargained with his nephew, Lot, for land; he went to war with four eastern kings. And while Abraham fought, Sarah schemed... because you can’t be the parent of a nation if you never have a child... and as her biological alarm clock went off with no heir in sight, Sarah gave her servant Hagar to her husband and Ishmael was born to them. So, you see... when we come to today’s story, not much has seemed like a laughing matter. Instead, the promise of blessing God holds out before them seems like an impossible dream, and the truth is after all this time they are left disbelieving.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Agnes Norfleet, “Laughing at God’s Promises,” a sermon from the pulpit of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, September 15, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Smedes in Bill Moyers, Genesis: A Living Conversation, P.162.

So, when God came strolling up to their camp that day in the guise of three strangers and offered yet again the promise that old Sarah was going to have a baby, she doubles over laughing behind the tent door. Because nothing (absolutely nothing) in her situation makes God's promise believable – she is just TOO old... and so is her husband.<sup>3</sup> But... Presbyterian writer, Frederick Buechner, hears something more in that laugh - he described her ridiculous situation like this: "Sarah and her husband had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had had not been wild enough."<sup>4</sup>

There were many things to keep Sarah from laughing... and there are many things that keep us from laughing these days. A pandemic that – to say the least – has dramatically altered our lives... tens of millions of Americans unemployed... and up to half of the workforce worldwide is threatened... long-term job and economic uncertainty – small businesses and low-wage service workers bearing the brunt... a nation that seems to get more polarized by the day is now in the middle of an election year... centuries of systemic racism and the unjust killing of black men and women exploding into protests - some of which have led to riots. And that's just since March! But even before COVID and George Floyd, many of us were already feeling a measure of anxiety and despair about many things. Just last year, the American Journal of Public Health published a study which looked at whether despair was on the rise among low-educated people in rural areas. The results concluded that despair was indeed rising... but not only in rural areas... it was rising across all racial, ethnic, educational and geographic groups. At the close of 2016, life expectancy in the United States had declined for the first time since 1993... and the rates of economic anxiety, suicide, drug overdose and alcohol-related diseases – the so-called as "deaths of despair" were on the rise.<sup>5</sup> So much going on even before COVID and George Floyd.

Well, what does Sarah do – in the midst of her hopelessness and despair – when those strangers show up and tell Abraham she will indeed have a baby? She laughs... a laugh that is part disbelief and part belief... a laugh that says, "No way this can happen, but I sure hope it does." Again, Fred Buechner: Sarah's laugh is what David does as he spins like a top in front of the ark when it is returned to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:16-21). It's what the Psalms are talking about where they say, "When the Lord had rescued Zion, then our mouth was filled with laughter" (126:1-2), It's what the Lord himself is talking about when he says that on the day he laid the cornerstone of the earth "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7), and it's what the rafters ring with when the Prodigal comes home and his old man is so glad to see him he almost has a stroke and "they began to make merry" and kept on making merry till the cows came home (Luke 15:24). It's what Jesus means when he stands in that crowd of cripples and loners and oddballs and rejects and says, "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21). Nobody claims there's a chuckle on every page of the Bible, but laughter's what the whole Bible is really about.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Norfleet.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 153

<sup>5</sup> "The Depths of Despair Among US Adults Entering Midlife," *The American Journal of Public Health*, May 2019. 7

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 153

Old Testament professor Patrick Miller wrote that in the Bible – “Laughter always announces the reversal of our anxieties and fears into joy and relief... God’s laughter overcomes the dangers that threaten God’s rule over our life. And more commonly, human laughter enables us to forget ourselves by letting go of what worries us... what ties us up within ourselves, in the uptightness of human life. Comic Relief is just what it claims to be,” Miller writes, “a relieving of what has become too heavy to bear.”

Well, it’s here that modern science agrees with the biblical scholar - laughter is good for our health. It not only lifts our mood and diminishes pain; it strengthens our immune system and protects us from the harmful effects of stress. Laughter releases endorphins that increase blood flow, it helps balance our spirit and mind and body, it inspires hope and better connects us to others... and in the end, it helps us live longer. And then there is this interesting scientific intersection with our scripture: At a very primitive level, laughter is deeply related with trust. A deep laugh which raises the head and exposes the neck is a physical sign of trust. We don’t laugh with people who threaten our safety – we laugh with people we trust.<sup>7</sup> And maybe that’s the ultimate gift of Sarah for us. Her situation – laughable indeed – raises the ultimate question of trust: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” That’s the question this wonderful story is asking us: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” If our answer is, “Yes, there are some thing to hard for God... there things that are impossible even for God,” then we have determined to live in a universe that is stable and predictable, but ultimately hopeless. But if we answer the question, “No, nothing is impossible for God,” then we have decided that with God the future is always open... that no person or situation is ever beyond hope... and that sometimes we might have to set aside human logic and just go with God’s logic.<sup>8</sup>

Now, most of us, I imagine, live our lives somewhere in between those extremes... somewhere in the middle... which, by the way, makes us a lot like Sarah and Abraham. For like these great ancestors in faith, our trust in God leads us into an unknown future. Faith is not being sure just where we are going, but going anyway, because it is God who beckons us. Faith is trying to live according the promises of God, and when those promises seem too wonderful to imagine, faith doubles over in laughter... laughter that is part disbelief and part belief... laughter that says, “No way this can happen,” but I sure hope it does.” Because you see, the success or failure of God’s promise did not depend on Sarah’s answer that day.<sup>9</sup> God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven... and as we read just a couple of chapters later, in due time, 90-year-old Sarah and 100-year-old Abraham did have a baby... a baby they named him Isaac. Do you remember what Isaac means? “He laughs!” In her old age, Sarah gave birth to a baby and named him Laughter. It turns out that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord... Or as Jesus said to Peter and the disciples: “With humans it is impossible, but not with God for all things are possible with God.”

So, when we look around at our world today and see precious little to laugh about... when we feel the rising tide of despair and cry out for hope... let’s remember Sarah... who once laughed because God’s promise made no sense... but later, in God’s time, she laughed because the promise was fulfilled... and that became her greatest joy!

---

<sup>7</sup> Norfleet.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Genesis, Interpretation Series, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, p. 160.