

June 14, 2020 'She Laughed at God!' (*Genesis 18:1-15*) Rev. Jane Courtright

For much of this summer, we will be exploring some of the richest stories from the book of Genesis! Today, we revisit two great ancestors of faith: Sarah and Abraham. Way back in Genesis, chapter 12, God said to both of them, "I will make of you a great nation and will bless you....all the families of the world will be blessed because of you." What a promise that began very small – as small as a baby in the womb.

Abraham and Sarah left their homeland on the basis of this promise. They traveled to and settled in a strange land and lived for years in their faith in God's promise. However, by today's reading, their faith is wearing thin! Both of them seem past believing such a promise can come true. Both of them!

So, God reminds them of the promise by telling them that they will have a child. We can only imagine the seriousness of this moment. And yet, Abraham breaks the seriousness. He falls on his face laughing at the very thought of God's promise and exclaims, "Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old?!! Can Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child?"

Abraham's laughter, as it turns out, is the laughter of unbelief. But God says (firmly and patiently,) "Your wife Sarah shall bear a son, and you shall name him Isaac." God has a sense of humor, too, you know. The name Isaac means in Hebrew, quite literally, 'Laughter!'

Not long after this, as we heard, God visits Sarah and Abraham in the persons of three messengers. Abraham and Sarah hurry around like mad to be hospitable to these three strangers. They put out their finest meal! As the meal begins, the strangers ask, "Where is Sarah, your wife?.....I will surely return to you....and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" This time, Sarah could hear the conversation. This time, it was Sarah who laughed, and said, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"

So, Sarah joins Abraham in the laughter of unbelief. When God asked her about her laughter later, she denied it. "No, but you did laugh," God said, having the last word as well as the first!

These babies, these children are a huge part of God's blessings spreading around the world, even to you and me. Our Bible contains many promises and hopes. We are told that it is time to beat swords in plowshares [We might say guns into gardening tools.] We are invited to look toward a time when every place will be peaceful. Everyone will have what they need to live. Everyone will feel that they belong. Everyone will see justice being done and love practiced. These are the hopes that bring us together!

Yet, at the same time, it's hard not to laugh in light of what we see happening in the world right now. How in the world could God's promises come true?!

Walter Brueggemann, Biblical scholar, once said, "The word of God...never comes to fruition as we expect it." Then we assume that God's word has failed us! We fall back on our own inadequate resources, or if we have no resources, we can fall into despair. If we do assume that God has failed us, what do our responses look like? In today's story, it looks like laughter. Abraham and Sarah saying, 'A child. That's funny. But it's too late for us!'

In yet another part of their story, Abraham and Sarah gave up on God's promise and had another slave woman named Hagar, bear Abraham's baby instead of Sarah. God also said to Hagar "Lift up the boy [her baby son Ishmael]- for I will make a great nation of him." I could preach another sermon on this part, and I will next Sunday!

Giving up on the promises of God. When you and I do it, how can it look?

*It can look like violent protests after yet another black person is murdered...taken too often and too soon.

*It can look like utter despair in the face of illness and death, whether in the wake of Covid-19 or other disease.

*It can look like soaring unemployment rates, families evicted from their homes, children with not enough to eat.

*It can look like irreconcilable differences which can polarize a government, a marriage, a family, any community group – when we stop trying to understand each other, stop imagining God's blessing and image upon every one of us.

Again, when we give up on God's promises, we rely on our own inadequate resources. We can be driven to despair. We seriously doubt God's promise.

In today's story, that's what Sarah and Abraham thought. Especially after so many years of trusting – but **come on!** Sometimes, 'ya' just 'gotta' laugh! Sarah laughs not only at the thought of God's promise coming true. Sure, she can think that God might bless the world through her baby; but that she might enjoy the process at her age is laughable to her. "After I am old, and my husband is old, shall I **HAVE PLEASURE?**"

That question seems frivolous in light of all of the pain in the world. Ross Gay, who wrote a book of essays titled 'The book of delights,' was once asked how we can possibly be joyful in times such as these? Gay replied that joy is a necessity in the midst of suffering, about how it's important to pay attention to what's beautiful in the world, not as a way of ignoring or avoiding what's terrible; but because joy, laughing, can remind us about our connections to other people, to everything, really.

Joy isn't always easy. And it isn't frivolous. It's just possible. Walter Brueggemann also says that everything is possible for those who stay through the dark night of barrenness with God. As Sarah and Abraham did. As Jesus did. As you and I sometimes do. That's the real message of today's story and of scripture as a whole: that God shows up, that God is faithful to promises made.

This story is an invitation to openness to God's promises. I don't know where you can do that, but if you are like me (or Abraham or Sarah,) you need to do it someplace. Where do you feel yourself sinking into despair? Where do you see yourself settling for something less than God's promises? (Less than justice, say? Less than respect and love? Less than peace?)

What makes you laugh...with skepticism or cynicism or hope? Pay attention to those places. Because **anything** is possible with God! !!! Amen.