

And Sarah Laughed

June 14, 2020

⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰Then one [of the visitors] 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. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

Everyone loves babies, right? We like to look on their cuteness with delight. Their random movements that make little sense. And some of us want children so that we can live out our own lives in them. Whatever mistakes we made or whatever lack of success we might have had in our own lives, might be corrected in the lives of our children. It rarely works out that way, but we hope, don't we?

We love children even if we don't have any of our own. Even if we don't want any of our own, but we love children because they express a joy that is often uninhibited. They say and do things that have little regard for what might be expressed by an adult. It's great to be an aunt or an uncle.

I love the “children's time” each Sunday because I never know what to expect, especially here at St. Pauls. Oh, I can't wait for the day when children can come forward and they can enlighten me as to the true ways of the world. It might be a long way off, but I laugh at the prospect of it happening again.

I grew up in an age in which “children should be seen but not heard.” When we gathered at my grandparents' house there was a “children's table” which were usually card-tables where in other times and venues our elders played bridge or canasta.

We were herded off to those tables even at my aunt's house where the tables went down into the rec room a floor below the main table because there was no room in the inn for us. It was OK with us because we didn't want to behave like adults upstairs anyways.

But Sarah and Abraham wanted a child. They had been promised a child.

Sarah was old when she overheard the news, while eavesdropping behind the door of their tent. It surprised her so much she couldn't stifle herself and broke out into a guffaw that even God heard.

"Did I hear Sarah laugh?" said God in the person of one of the visitors.

"Who me!?" said Sarah, trying to stuff her fist between her gums, bared wide in a fit of laughter. "Why would I laugh - a ninety-year old woman, childless since the day she was born, told from the beginning that she is going to have a baby!

Squawk!!"

"Don't lie to me!" said God. "You laughed!"

It's a wonderful scene, really. An old codger ready for the nursing home trying to explain to God what's so funny. And we all know what was so funny. After all those years, after all that waiting and all that believing and hoping, only to be told now at the very end of her life....

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" God asked. Another translation of that verb might be "Hard". "Is there anything too HARD for the Lord?"

"Yes!" Sarah laughed, but probably to herself this time. She agreed in a certain way, "There might just be some things just too wonderful (Or hard) even for the Lord!"

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It is a laughter people like you and me know well - this laughter of dis-belief. We laugh because we are uncertain.

If you are a teenager, there are times when you laugh because you think your parents will never understand you. That laughter often gets expressed with a rolling of the eyes. If you are a parent, there are times when you laugh because you wonder if your kids will ever grow up. Will they ever be responsible!

If you are married and desperately unhappy, there are times when you laugh because you wonder if you will ever find a way "out". If you are single and lonely, there are times when you laugh because you wonder if you will ever find a way "into" a happy relationship. We laugh because we think we will never get out of debt, never

get free from our past, never find someone to love us, never find a place to call home. And promises from the government that we will have a comfortable middle-class living is just, well not trustworthy. We laugh.

We laugh Sarah's laugh, not because we have faith, but because we find it impossible to have faith in such promises. That is the disturbing truth being held up before us in this week's story: that faith is not a reasonable act and that the promise of God is not just a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. Abraham and Sarah laughed because they had reached a dead end in their lives and because they had adjusted to it. The promises of God, notwithstanding. They had accepted their hopelessness just the way, if we are honest, we too accommodate ourselves to all those barren places in our lives where the call to believe in "a new thing that God will do" seems, quite frankly, nonsensical. And we laugh an uncomfortable laugh.

Will we get out of this Covid-19 crisis safely? If you listen too much to TV, there are conflicting reports. We can only hope without knowing.

And yet..., there is another kind of laughter to which the promise made in this story also points. A very different kind of laughter. The laughter, not of Sarah or Abraham, but the laughter of that One who keeps his own counsel and works His own will - whether or not we have the faith to see it. Sometimes we have to wait to share in that kind of laughter, just as Abraham and Sarah had to wait, as well.

Any time we take on an uncertain task or face an uncertain future we laugh. Or God laughs. Perhaps, God laughs with us and the ridiculous idea that joy triumphs over despair, good over evil, love over hatred. It's funny. And we laugh.

Laughter is better than fear in the face of uncertainty and despair.

The child of Abraham and Sarah is finally born. His name is Isaac. The word "Isaac" means "He laughed."

Genesis 21: Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. 4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

We don't know how old Abraham really was, but a hundred years seems like a good number to impress upon us that he was very old.

6 Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” 7 And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

And God Laughed. Sarah laughed. Abraham laughed. A full embodied laugh. Not the laugh of suspicion or doubt, but the full laughter of joy and she named him “Isaac” which means they laughed.

We laugh when we find God’s promises to be ridiculous. We laugh when God’s promises are fulfilled. Laughter is the right response to both promise and despair. Isn’t that odd?

It is odd, but it is just right. Laughter with the rolling of the eyes when the pronouncement is made in the most extraordinary circumstances. And laughter when we recognize that the promise has been fulfilled.

But always laughter. The life of faithfulness is always about laughter.

Always laughter.

Always laughter.

Amen.