

Love to Laugh

It probably comes as no surprise that I love to laugh. One of my favorite songs from *Mary Poppins* carries that very title in fact.¹ As you may recall the scene opens with Mary Poppins, Bert, and the Banks children being called to Mary's uncle's house. Uncle Albert can't stop laughing, and when he laughs he floats up to the ceiling and around the room. Bert warns the children to keep a straight face because if they join in, the problem gets worse: "Last time it took us three days to get him down." As a child I marveled at the silliness of the scene. As an adult, I find myself wanting to float and giggle and guffaw aloud along with Bert and Uncle Albert and Jane and Michael Banks while proper Mary Poppins looks on with a frown. The image of being lifted by laughter is one that speaks to something deep down, at least for me. Some of my most healing moments of late have included bouts of laughter with friends, colleagues, and loved ones. We have laughed over screens and phone lines at silly memories, at our still not remembering to mute or un-mute ourselves on Zoom, and over corny jokes, and it has been good, supremely good even.

Sarah knows how it feels to long to laugh. When we first meet her in chapter 11, she is singled out in one of those biblical lists of names known as genealogies, the lists with all the "begats" in the King James Version. Everyone else is listed with their names and the names of their spouses. Sarah, or Sarai as she is called at first, we are told, "was barren, she had no child."² This is a huge plot point of course. In a few verses after that one, God calls Abram to leave all he has known and all who know him to travel to an unknown place where God promises to make Abram a great nation, a great blessing through which all the nations of the world will be blessed. So if we're paying attention our ears perk up. How exactly does God intend to pull this off through 75 year old Abram and his barren wife Sarai? So Sarai's lack of a child is a huge plot point in the story, but her inability to bear a child is more than a plot point for her or for others who have struggled in similar ways. To say it is no laughing matter is an understatement at minimum. It is heart-wrenching and heart-breaking in a deeply personal way.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOMqql-kzHY>

² Genesis 11: 18, Robert Alter's translation

I've always wondered how Sarai responds when Abram tells her about his conversation with God. Clearly she goes along on this journey to an unnamed destination, but does she laugh then? Does she allow the tiniest spark of hope to begin to burn within her? Does she dare to trust that such an outlandish promise of children and grandchildren just might be true?

Our first text this morning comes six chapters and 25 years after Abram and Sarai's journey begins. 25 years. Old Abe is 100 years old now. Sarah is staring down 90. As two other pastors point out, "If Abraham and Sarah were a Netflix season, this would be about episode 7."³ In the episodes that come before ours, Abram and Sarai travel to Egypt where Abram deceives the king into sparing his life by saying that Sarai is his sister. God soon promises Abram once again that he will be the father of a great nation. Sarai and Abram get a bit nervous and try an end run to get a grip on the promise, and Abram fathers a child with Hagar, Sarai's servant. To no one's surprise, Sarai comes to resent Hagar and the child Ishmael. God tells Abram once again that he will be the father of nations and more explicitly that Sarai will be the mother of kings. God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah, emphasizing the seriousness of the promise. And Abraham responds by laughing. He laughs so hard that he falls flat on his face, and then tries to convince God to just go with Ishmael. But God will not be moved from the promise, as laughable as that promise may seem.

In our text for this morning, with Abraham's laughter echoing on the breeze, some visitors arrive. Abraham promises them a small snack while providing a feast in a display of extreme hospitality that would impress the most over-the-top Southern grandmother. He directs Sarah to bake bread from the finest flour, and not just a little bread, but 36 pounds of flour's worth of bread. I imagine Sarah peeking out from the tent with flour smudged on her face and her dress, worn out not just from the whirlwind feast preparation but from year after year and month after month of hoping for the promise to be true, only to be bitterly disappointed. So when Sarah overhears the visitor reiterate the promise and give it a definite timeline, she laughs.

I don't think this is the kind of laugh that sends Sarah giggling and floating to the roof of the tent. The visitor confronts her about why she laughs, and she denies laughing at all. She is afraid it seems, afraid of offending this mysterious guest but also perhaps afraid to hope and trust yet again that the promise is true. I

³ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper6a/#Genesis18%3A1-15=>

know that laughter. Our gay friends and trans neighbors know that laughter. Our black and brown siblings know that laughter. Our older friends who have been isolated from everyone for weeks know that laughter. I'm guessing you may know that laughter, too. Maybe you have even found yourself laughing in that way in recent days or weeks. It teeters on the edge of crying, and echoes because it is hollow inside. "I did not laugh," Sarah insists, but the holy visitor has heard her. He has heard Sarah's innermost weariness, disappointment, and fear. She cannot hide it. "Yes, you did laugh," he responds.

Sarah acts as if she has been exposed, busted even, but what if she has also been seen? In hearing and naming her laugh, God reveals that he knows her deepest longing and her pain. Sarah responds as if she is in trouble, but nothing in the text says that is true. What it does tell us is that Sarah's despair and disbelieving laughter are not hidden from God. God sees her hiding behind the tent flap. God knows she has been hiding much more, carrying much more for years. In other words, God gets it, and God gets her in all of her complicated, weary, bitter, can't-hope-one-more-day-ness, and God still pledges to make the promise come true in and through her.

It sounds too good to be true and laughable in our ears, too, doesn't it? Or I confess it does in mine. In our own little corner of the world, I want to believe that something new will be born among us in the coming year, too. I want to imagine this place filled with familiar faces and new ones, too. I long to be a part of a gathered in-person community where beautiful singing is accompanied by the sounds of wiggling babies and the giggles of children of all ages. I want to picture our giving each other bear hugs and fist bumps and high-fives. I love the idea of our continuing to make new friends through our online worship while also welcoming new faces of all kinds and backgrounds to break bread with us at this table. I so badly want to trust that this can happen, but I confess that when I hear of spreads and spikes and more uncertainty with this stubborn virus, my laugh echoes Sarah's laugh inside the tent a bit, too. But God is not deterred. [Read Genesis 21:1-7]

Laughter God has made me. Not only is Sarah's laughter transformed, she is changed, too. Now we need to be clear: this is not happily ever after. Challenges still lie ahead for Sarah and Abraham and the underdog nation of ancient Israel that finds its beginnings here. And yet there is and will always be this story to point to, this memory that when all seems lost, when the promise seems too precarious to survive, God makes a

way. And along the way God also creates laughter, belly-clutching, side-stitch-inducing laughter. This laughter bubbles up in joyful praise of a God who promises to create a people to be a blessing to and for all the nations of the world, against all the odds, no matter what obstacles stand in the way. God is determined to create a people from a pair of shriveled, washed up, all but washed out senior citizens. And God holds the same hope for us, too.

Laughter God has made me. Even now, in the midst of mask-wearing and vaccine vigils, could it be that we are being transformed into something new, a community that embodies the joy that God so longs to share with the world? Not an empty, pie-in-the-sky, cheap or easy kind of happiness, but a people of deep, life-affirming joy? In the thick of an uncertain season in the middle of a bruised and battered world, can we imagine ourselves becoming laughter itself? Could we be a people of laughter, born in the midst of detours and struggles, laughter born of faith that nothing is beyond God, that nothing and no one falls outside of God's concern and care? Such laughter would not mean that we are frivolous or delusional or have our heads buried in the sand, but instead that we know that despair and exclusion and disappointment are real **AND** that they are not the end of the story. Nothing is too wonderful for God; nothing is too difficult for God; nothing is beyond God. God is not stopped by our doubts or stymied by our dead ends. Perhaps that news alone is enough to lift us and everyone else to the rafters, laughing with astonished joy at what God can do. Truth be told, I suspect that God is already up there in the rafters waiting to laugh with us, because something tells me that God loves to laugh, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.