

**August 18, 2019**  
**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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## **SARAH LAUGHED**

Genesis 18:1-15

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>He 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. <sup>3</sup>He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup>Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup>Let 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." <sup>6</sup>And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup>Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>Then 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. They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." <sup>9</sup>Then 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. <sup>10</sup>Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>11</sup>So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>12</sup>The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" <sup>13</sup>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." <sup>14</sup>But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Prayer for Illumination

Great God of astounding surprises, come to us with your startling revelations and disclosures so we may continue to revel in your promises.

## INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite book titles is *God Must Have A Sense Of Humor, Otherwise God Would Not Create Orangutans and People Like Us*. Today, we are going to get a glimpse of God's sense of humor, or, at least, how God humored Sarah.

Some form of the word laughter is found only 43 times in the Bible, and almost always in a negative light.

Laughter in the Bible is almost always the laughter of scorn and derision. In the Old Testament, the history of God's people is one long litany of lamentable mistakes, which would be funny if it weren't so deadly serious. In the New Testament, the central symbol of the faith is an instrument of execution. In the Gospels, Jesus shares almost every conceivable human emotion except laughter. He sheds tears, he shows love, he feels pity, he gets angry, but he never laughs. Matters of faith don't usually make good fodder for the late night comedy shows (unless the church lady is on the scene.) It's a long way from John Calvin to Jimmy Fallon.

And yet, I find it striking that the history of Israel begins with a good laugh. This is the way the story goes. One day when Abraham was resting outside his tent during the stifling heat of mid-day, three travelers appear as if from nowhere, and Abraham, like any good nomadic host, spreads before them a lavish banquet. After the meal, the visitors, who turn out to be God and a couple of God's messengers, promise Abraham that he, who is pushing a hundred and has been on Social Security for 30 years, is going to have a baby. Sarah's last hot flash was 40 years ago; as the Bible delicately puts it, "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women."

Sarah overhears the conversation and, quite against her will, lets loose with an impolitic roar quite audible to the Lord, whose hearing is good.

Then there is that wonderful interchange between the Lord and Abraham and Sarah:

"Why did Sarah laugh?"

"I didn't laugh."

"O yes, you did laugh."

"Did not."

"Did so."

"No! I did not!"

And the question—the question of all questions: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

The Lord doesn't reprimand her.

She receives no blame for having tried to hide her reaction.

God simply confirms that she laughed.

Sarah tries to withdraw her laughter, but God is not having that!

The son Sarah will bear will be called Isaac – which is Hebrew for "God laughs".

#### WHY DID SARAH LET OUT A LAUGH?

You might say, no wonder Sarah laughed. Did she laugh out of embarrassment? Did she laugh because it all seemed so absurd and preposterous? Or, did she laugh as a result of utter relief and gratitude.

You've got to have a sense of humor to believe in a God who specializes in impossible pregnancies—ancient Sarah, headed for the obstetrics ward; barren Hannah, who's visited every fertility specialist in Palestine before giving up and trying prayer instead; the Virgin

Mary, the teenaged mother who had just learned the facts of life. Reinhold Niebuhr noted that “humor is the prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer.”<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

If laughter is the appreciation of incongruity, so is faith. Pascal said, “Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between what one expects, and what one sees.” In the presence of this God, we are always finding this surprising disproportion between what we expect, and what we see. In that way, faith is just like laughter. Faith is always waiting to see what fabulously impossible thing God is going to do next.

Who could have foreseen that not Caesar with his throne and troops but Jesus with his cross and wounds would rescue the wayward world from its own disastrous misfortune? Who could have foreseen that God would love you not because of what you did but in spite of what you did?

Distinguished Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this is the elemental Bible story because it is about the elemental Judeo-Christian notion of God. God, not as an abstraction, not as a remote power off somewhere in the sky, but as a presence: a God who shows up in the barren lives of two old people, shows up with the promise of life and hope. The overwhelming and always relevant question here—“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”—is at the heart of what it means to have faith.

God comes alongside humanity to change the most desperate life story into a future with hope. All who fear, hurt, ache, are humiliated or discouraged—God calls us all, invites us all, sets us free to experience the miracle of life...

- a dream coming unexpectedly true...
- a friendship growing...
- a relationship healing...
- understanding & liberation dawning ...
- love to be found...
- a new perspective for life on the horizon...
- a place that feels like home...
- peace in a place of violence and war...
- equity in the place of imbalance...

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story of two people, parents of us all, moving from hopelessness to hope, from despair and resignation to possibility, from barrenness to productivity, from death to life.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, faith is not about knowing everything there is to know about God. It is knowing that there is plenty about God that we don't know. Faith is not certainty. Faith is acknowledging that God will not be reduced to the limits of human understanding. God will be God, and there will always be surprises.

Babies are born to 90-year-old women, seas split in two, a carpenter rises from the dead, the prodigal son is welcomed home, you are loved. Yes, you, in spite of yourself, even if you don't want to be, you are loved. The history of God's people begins with a joke, a son named Laughter, and it ends with a smile,  
...there is laughter beyond the veil,

- life after death,
- a child after decades of infertility,
- a future after disappointment and frustration,
- and a new land for those without a place to stay...

This is how we can sum-up Sarah's laugh and respond to the question – "Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

#### Prayer

Dear God, please help us to trust in you, and remind us that you never let us down and will always keep your promises. When we doubt, help us turn to you. While we find it hard to believe the impossible, let us remember that with you, nothing is impossible. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Incongruity Theory" of Laughter is explicated in Reinhold Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, and in John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*, SUNY Press, 1999.