

**SERMON – “AND SARAH LAUGHED”**  
**GENESIS 18: 1-15, 21:1-7**

"Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old and my husband has grown old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed have a child now that I am old?' 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." But Sarah denied saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

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

"Did I hear Sarah laugh?" said God.

"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 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 geriatric ward 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 only to be told now at the very end of her life....

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" God asked.

"Yes!" Sarah laughed, but probably to herself this time. "There are some things just too wonderful even for the Lord!"

It is a laughter people like you and me know well - this laughter of dis-belief.

If you are a teenager, there are times when you laugh because you think your parents will never understand you. If you are a parent, there are times when you laugh because you wonder if your kids will ever grow up. 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 "in". 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.

We laugh Sarah's laugh, not because we have faith, but because we find it impossible to have it. 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. 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 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 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, too.

### The Positive Power of Laughter

Humor / Good Laughter is so healing.

You get drawn into laughter and the more you laugh the better you feel. Sometime it's born out of the hardest times. Sarah's laughter was not only in disbelief – it was perhaps the ironic pain of all those “childbearing years” being childless.

Humorist Art Buchwald once commented “I went into humor because I had only two choices, either to be funny or to kill people. I owe my humor to my life in the orphanage and a series of foster homes. I found that the best way to get people to love me was through humor.”

Barry? – 1970’s – worked with cancer patients out of Yale. Added “humor” therapy – my friend Bob Meyer – we would sit with Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers and then a series of recordings of two downeast humorists, Burt and Ives.

I don’t claim to be a humorist, but I love to laugh. Rev. Thomas Hall says “My moments of being serious are usually relieved by interludes of humor. Laughing at myself or laughing at someone’s funny story.” I agree with him - laughing at life, being able to see our own foibles and not get hung up, being able to just sit back and guffaw good and loud – is important to being able to live a healthy life.

Well, if anyone tries to say the Bible is deadly serious and has no humour, they haven’t read today’s lesson. One colleague talked about sharing this story at a nursing home one day and the residents who understood it were rolling in laughter.

Imagine it: an old woman has spent a lifetime in the desert. What would she look like? After all, she’s pushing ninety - so let’s say probably seventy years as a nomad, travelling around in the dry and heat, or dry and cold in the winter, hauling heavy tents around, tending herds of goats and sheep, milking, growing a few veggies where possible. I saw modern nomads in Africa who were in their 40’s and looked 90. You can imagine a very old, seamed and lined face. Her husband is pretty much the same, as he’s likely closer to a hundred. Probably both of them are a little hunched over, and fairly thin, and from the back you’d have a hard time telling which was which. A messenger from God arrives, tells her she’s going to have a baby, tells him he will be a father of nations.

Sarai is the first one to say something - she says to the angel “You’re kidding, right? Do you know how old I am????” The angel, bits of laughter quirking the corners of his mouth, says he indeed knows how old she is, but it’s still true, she is going to have a baby, and Abram will be a father.

I don’t know about all you, but I can just see it. A wizened, bent over woman, squinting her eyes shut, throwing her head back and laughing the biggest belly laugh until she is mopping the tears from her face - and she can’t stop, and she has to hold her sides and rock back and forth.

Abram manages to keep a straight face a few seconds longer than she does, but he ends by cracking up too. The angel smirks and tries desperately not to laugh, hides his mouth behind a wing, but eventually even the angel is roaring with laughter - and there they all are, tears pouring down their faces, laughing until they hurt.

Negative laughter:

Not all laughter is healthy, of course. It can be derisive – using others in a derogatory way to bolster one’s own ego. Laughter at another’s expense is never good laughter.

Laughter can also be born solely out of cynicism and disbelief. Shut down, closed off – “I know better” Laughter.

Abram and Sarai start out with cynical laughter. Bitter, cynical laughter. They have resigned themselves to a closed future. So when the promise comes to them, they meet it with a laughter of unbelief. Someone called this kind of laughter a “cackle of hopelessness. Fortunately, while it may have begun that way, their journey doesn’t \*end\* with a such a cackle.

And God didn’t condemn either of them for their irreverent laughter. Yahweh goes on to challenge them to move beyond the cynicism of disbelief.

For God speaks a probing question into their future: “Is there anything too hard for God to do?” That is the question around which this entire story revolves. “Is there anything too hard for God to do?”

That question is an open one and still waits for an answer from us. And don’t think you can skitter past this story and avoid the question either. The question surfaces everywhere in the Bible. It is the fundamental question that we all must answer. How we answer the question will determine our laughter. If the question is answered, 'Yes, some things are too hard, impossible for God,' then in fact we have failed to confess God as God."

If, on the other hand, we say, “Nothing is impossible for God,” then we can fully entrust ourselves to God and not get hung up in worry about what comes next, or how we get there, or even if we \*are\* there yet. Then we can laugh at ourselves, laugh with God when a Word of

impossibility is spoken into our future.

Abram and Sarai shift from a cynical laugh to a faith-filled belly laugh! They laugh because God is going to shatter the confines of human limitations, and create possibility out of what seemed hopeless. God is always doing a new thing, in spite of us.

Connie Schroeder wrote this poem in reflection on Sarah:

*A Song for Sarah*

*By Connie Schroeder*

*Impossible, laughable dreams  
Long gone  
A memory, nearly lost in the mists.  
But they said it would be so  
How in heaven's name could it be?  
Her belly shook with silent laughter  
The idea...  
"at my age...  
Impossible, implausible  
Ridiculously unachievable  
It could not be  
And even still with all her practicality  
Some small spark of hope  
Was there  
And she thought of her newest garment  
Perfumes and jewelry  
She thought of her husband  
They would laugh together  
Feeling hopelessly silly  
Yet trying once again  
Opening to God's impracticable nature  
You know how the story ends...  
Or should I say, begins!  
Impossibility becomes a nation*

Sarai laughs, because God has done the unthinkable. Her laughter is evangelical – “sharing the good news”. I love that word in this context - we don't have to work this out by ourselves. The God who promises life to our perceived barrenness continues to fulfill the promise.

Sarai laughed a belly laugh of astonishment at God's ability to do the impossible. Nine months after God promised the ninety-year old and the hundred-year-old a son, there was that very baby. The name on the crib was Isaac - which in Hebrew means, "Laughter. or another translation is "Let God Laugh". Sarai and Abram not only got the joke, they celebrated God's humor by naming their baby "Laughter."

God has the last laugh . . . from Isaac, the humor of God will carry out a much larger plan . . . to bless the entire world through people like us who can laugh with God . . . what a hoot!" May it be so.

*My thanks to Barry Robinson, Fran Ota, and Connie Schroeder for their writings on this passage.*