“Great Laughter”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 15, 2019


When I was in seminary, I worked at an adult day care center where about forty folks – many of them with some kind of physical disability, almost all of them dealing with some stage of dementia – would gather each day at a neighborhood church. You can imagine how difficult it could be to assure the participants, their families, and staff members each day that everything was going to be okay. The program’s founder and director was named Faith; and never have I met a person more aptly named. Because of her great faith in the purpose of and people involved in the program, others around her could somehow put away their fears and trust that God was at work at that place and in her presence.

In the ancient world, names often indicated something about the character of the person, or the circumstances of their birth. The name Isaac – as we heard in today’s reading – means “great laughter.” Following a promise made 25 years ago to Abraham and Sarah that – when they left their family and their home and journeyed into a strange, new world – they would one day bear a child; and following numerous plot twists and turns along the way, that promise finally comes to fulfillment. These parents are so filled with joy that there is nothing else they can do but laugh; and everyone else who hears about it will laugh with them.

But, of course, this is not the first time that we hear about laughter this morning. In our first reading, Sarah laughs when she hears strangers telling Abraham the news that they will bear a son “in due season” – which literally means it will happen within the year. Sarah, overhearing this pronouncement, alone in her tent, laughs to herself, not believing that anyone is listening. Perhaps she is laughing at the ridiculousness of life: that at her age and after waiting so many years for the promise to be fulfilled, the day has finally come; maybe she is laughing so that she doesn’t cry. For, who knows how many miscarriages Sarah might have had; or what in her body or in her husband’s body had made it physically impossible for them to have children. There are countless reasons beyond our understanding why, even today, it is challenging or even beyond possible for those who desire children to have that dream fulfilled.¹

¹ Katy Stenta, “Loneliness and Abundance”
The episode comes to a conclusion with Sarah’s denial of her laughter at this promise’s absurdity. Sarah may not have even realized that she laughed; but she clearly was in denial about it, until the man says to her, “yes, yes you did.” Into this awkward narrative pause, God – through the voice of the visitor – hurls the question, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord; too difficult; too extraordinary? The Lord is promising here to accomplish something that is truly beyond the ordinary – a child born will be born to parents who are beyond child-bearing age – and by means of this question invites them to trust that it will be so.

But before we get to the actual birth and naming of Isaac – the long-awaited fulfilment of God’s promise – let’s look again at how this news came to them. Chapter 18 of Genesis begins with Abraham sitting under the oaks of Mamre in the heat of the day. Abraham and Sarah are living in a tent, still journeying towards the unnamed land to which God promised to lead them. We are told that the Lord met Abraham there, but what he sees instead when he looks up is three men – the strangers that we have come to recognize as angels entertained unaware – who are suddenly standing near him.

What happens next is seen as one of the best examples of generous hospitality in the ancient world. Abraham – ninety-nine years old at the time – runs to meet them, bows down before them, and invites them to come and sit in the shade. He makes sure that they have water to drink and washes their feet. He instructs his wife and servant to prepare a meal of bread and meat, curds and milk. Abraham could not have been a more gracious host to these strangers.

Something else, though, seems to be going on behind the scene. While Abraham stands beside the men while they are eating, they ask him where Sarah, his wife, is. “There in the tent” is his reply. Though we’re not told she has yet made an appearance, the visitors already know her name, and soon show that they know even more. Maybe Sarah stays hidden inside because of societal customs – you know, the men are supposed to eat only with the men – but maybe it also says something about where the relationship between this man and his wife really stood; that after all these years, they were no longer as connected as maybe they once had been. Who knows, maybe Sarah laughs to herself as much at the prospect of making the baby as having one.

“Where is your wife Sarah?” Far from being a simple question of location, the inquiry from the visitor here calls attention not only to her absence, but maybe to her existential situation.2 Abraham’s reply, “there in the tent,” seems to keep

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2 Margaret Odell from WorkingPreacher.com
Sarah not only in her place, but also at arm’s length. This is, after all, the same husband who had passed his wife off as his sister, and will do so again even after this promise of a son; who had a son with his slave girl Hagar, only to send them into the wilderness when things got too wierd. This is Abraham who, a chapter earlier, when reminded by God that he would bear a son did not just chuckle to himself, but – we’re told – falls down on the ground laughing.

The promise given here is not simply of an extra-ordinary birth. Rather, the miracle is also that this promise will bring Sarah and Abraham back together again. It takes divine intervention to reverse the long, complicated history of Abraham and Sarah’s marriage, and Sarah laughs at the possibility of change. Even as Sarah denies her laughter, God – for at this point, we are told that it indeed is the Lord speaking – acknowledges Sarah’s reality: “yes, you did laugh.” It will take time, but Abraham and Sarah will not have to stay in this place: he sitting under the oak trees; she, hidden in the ten; the barrier between them far greater than the thickness of the tent wall. No, because with God, nothing is too difficult, too wonderful. In due season, when Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah, Sarah will be able to laugh again; this time with genuine joy.

When both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the improbability of anything new coming from their old, worn-out bodies or their fraught marriage, their laughter was born out of doubt; based in human impossibility. But the laughter that broke forth from Sarah at the birth of her child was the laughter of joy at the newness God brought into impossibility. It was the laughter of unrestrained delight at the promise that Sarah could now hold in her hands. It was that delightful laughter that Sarah memorialized in naming Isaac and then sharing it with others.³

“Well who would have ever said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?” While Sarah may have meant her question to be rhetorical, it is still rife with meaning. Sarah is likely asking it from a human perspective, to which the answer is, no one. No one would have ever thought or dreamed that this could be; let alone even give voice to the possibility.

But from the perspective of this long-standing promise, the answer must be God. God said it was going to happen; this is exactly what we are told in the story, even if God’s identity is temporarily masked in the three strangers who appear to Abraham on the road. They are simply the messengers – the mouthpieces – for God who, as we hear in the first verse of chapter 21, acts in ways that are beyond our conception of what is even possible: “the Lord did with Sarah just as he said.”

³ Dennis Bratcher
And so, is anything too difficult for God? Is anything too wonderful, too extra-ordinary? While we sometimes answer no when it is asked in the abstract, when we know it is what we are supposed to say, when it comes to the realities of life the answer is not always so easy. After all, it is not that we actually deny that God could work in wondrous, mysterious, and seemingly impossible ways, we just convince ourselves that it’s not often, if ever. In some situations, it is too difficult for us to imagine.

I don’t want to try to name that place for you. I have a child for whom we work and pray every day that he could speak even his own name, so I won’t pretend that there are not times when I doubt whether anything is impossible with God. For others, it is wondering whether the addiction can be overcome, whether the relationship will ever be mended, whether the pain will ever cease. The plain truth is, we are not the ones who grant God’s promises, so we cannot determine what direction God’s work will take in our lives.

Sarah’s barrenness was a human reality; and so there is nothing unusual about her attitude of placing that promise made into the realm of the impossible. It seems to me that many people, when asked the visitor’s question, “is anything too wonderful?” if honest, would answer yes. And so, we laugh that laugh of doubt, sometimes to ourselves, sometimes out loud.

But this ancient story also reminds us that we can proclaim the nature of this God who speaks to Abraham and Sarah as the God who brings newness into the dead ends of life; who can do for us and with us that for which we cannot do for ourselves; what is too difficult or wonderful or extra-ordinary. This God can turn the laughter of our doubts into the incredible laughter of joy as we witness newness—new possibility, new imagination, new life, new health—springing forth.

In God, we can place our faith and trust: faith that we will never be left alone or forgotten and trust that while for us, things might not be possible, but with God—in our partnerships with and the people God places in our lives—what we cannot do or sometimes even imagine becomes possible; what is empty can become full, even sadness can be turned to laughter. It is this God in whom we put our faith and our trust. Amen.