

Laughing at God's Promises

Second in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of
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by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Genesis 18:1-15

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. ²He 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. ³He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let 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.” ⁶And Abraham

hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.”⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.⁸ 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.

⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

Psalm 126

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.² Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”³ The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.⁵ May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.⁶ Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Several of you made sure that I saw the *New York Times* article from last weekend about Rutgers Presbyterian Church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Rutgers is made up of Presbyterians, Catholics, Jews, those who describe themselves as vaguely spiritual and even self-avowed atheists. The church has rejected the notion that the connective tissue of a congregation is solely to embrace a shared faith. The congregation gathers – not just around traditional tenets of the faith – but social activism. “They have reinvented themselves,” says professor of American religious history at Vanderbilt University, Jim Hudnut-Beumler, by drawing together a small, but vibrant community who cares for one another, works in the community, and advocates for matters of justice and environmental stewardship.

I would say that in ways not completely dissimilar, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian is wide open to seekers – people who come with their doubts and skepticism, but I don’t think we are yet willing to prioritize activism over nurturing faith. I believe activism flows out of faith, and that serious engagement with the Bible and Theology is what makes our hearts burn with a sense of mission. Faith is the foundation of our considering issues, not the other way around. So, to the church member who sent me the *New York Times* article humorously suggesting that I preach my next sermon series on the sermon topic mentioned in it – as preached at Rutgers Presbyterian, know that I am not likely to use Advent to focus on genetically modified vegetables.¹

Genesis brings us again to think about how this faith of ours – will have its intended ripple effect, so that - in time - *all the families of the earth shall be blessed*. We cannot fulfill that calling without social activism, working for justice, and being better stewards of the earth. And that work begins in trusting the promise. One of the interesting things about this ancient family saga, as it unfolds, is from the very beginning, the promise God gave seems always to be at risk. That bright and hopeful future, based on generations of descendants, opportunity to settle in a good and prosperous land, and to be a blessing for the world is repeatedly imperiled.

¹ “The Church Where Believing in God Isn’t Strickly Necessary,” *New York Times*, 9/6/19.

Between that initial call to journey toward abundant blessing back in Chapter 12, and today's reading a lot of wild things have transpired. With no fulfilled promise in sight. First, there was a famine so Abraham and Sarah went down to Egypt for food. Afraid that Pharaoh will kill him in order to have his beautiful wife, Abraham lied and said Sarah was his sister and she almost got swallowed up into Pharaoh's harem. But God rescued Sarah by sending great plagues and the family was on the road again.

Then Abraham bargained with his nephew, Lot, for land; he went to war with four eastern kings. While Abraham fought Sarah schemed. You cannot be the parent of a nation if you never have a child, so as her biological clock ticked on with no heir in sight, Sarah gave her servant Hagar to her husband and Ishmael was born to them. We will take up that complexity of the family tree next Sunday. But in the meantime, when we get to the story before us this morning, so far not much has seemed like a laughing matter. The promise of blessing God holds out before them dangles unfulfilled like an impossible dream, and they are left disbelieving.

One commentary describes these Genesis stories this way: "God is founding a dynasty, the beginnings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. One might expect the story teller to paint the family ten feet tall with several coats of whitewash. But the picture we get of these men and women is uncomfortably human. There is so much marital conflict and sibling intrigue they almost forfeit the call and fumble the promise. Yet the storyteller refuses to clean up their act. This is the amazing thing about the people of Genesis. The more we talk about them, the more they look like people we know – faces in the mirror."²

Some of you may remember, years ago, when Bill Moyers, hosted a series of conversations about the Book of Genesis on public television. He gathered a group of biblical scholars and professors of ancient languages; Christian, Jewish and Islamic religious leaders; psychologists and philosophers; writers, artists, and poets; a screen writer and film director,

² Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, P.155.

and together over the course of many weeks they sat around a table and talked about Genesis. A published transcript of that television series is called *Genesis: A Living Conversation*. It is a wonderful, contemporary Midrash – a lively conversation about how diverse people understand the living truths of these ancient stories.

I especially enjoy their conversation about Sarah. One of them imagines how Sarah might have assimilated this call of God upon her family at the beginning of their journey - saying: “I can imagine Sarah waking up about four in the morning, hearing the bustling noise of Abraham packing. And Sarah says, “What are you doing, Abe?” “Packing.” “What for?” “Well, we’re leaving.” “Where are we going?” “I don’t know. “Why are we going.” “Because he told me to.” “Who’s ‘He’?” “He didn’t tell me.” And then I could imagine Sarah calling her father: “What am I going to do?” and her father says, “I knew you should not have married that nut.”³

Well, Sarah was Abraham’s wife, and when the Call and the Promise were made to him, she also embarked on a remarkable journey of faith. And in some measure, I think it may be easier to identify with Sarah than with Abraham precisely because all of us have been pulled into this enterprise called faith because of a call made to another. We are heirs to a promise of blessing that has been handed down to us for generations, and when you go all the way back to the beginning that promise had to be born first to Sarah. When God came strolling up in the guise of three strangers, offering yet again that old Sarah was going to have a baby, she doubles over in laughter behind the tent door. Nothing in her situation makes God’s promise believable – she is too old and so is her husband.

Presbyterian writer, Frederick Buechner described her ridiculous situation like this: “Sarah and her husband had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they’d better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it

³ Lewis Smedes in Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, P.162.

suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had had not been wild enough.”⁴

You know, there are a lot of things that keep us from laughing these days. Many of us feel a measure of anxiety and despair about many things. In May, *The American Journal of Public Health* published a peer reviewed research paper on “The Depths of Despair Among Adults” in the United States. The objective was to study whether there were indicators of rising despair among low-educated people in rural areas. The results concluded that over the past decade evidence of rising despair is not restricted to rural areas, but cuts across all racial, ethnic, educational and geographic groups. At the close of 2016, for the first time since 1993 life expectancy in the United States had declined. The article describes rising rates of economic anxiety, suicide, drug overdose and alcohol related diseases as “deaths of despair,” and notes, “scholars attributed the rise in midlife mortality to a general context of hopelessness and self-destructive behaviors reflecting despair.”⁵

What does Sarah do – in the midst of her hopelessness and despair – when those strangers show up and tell Abraham she will have a baby? She laughs. As an antidote to despair, Sarah can help us remember the importance of laughter – not just to buoy the life of faith – but also to equip us for this journey of being a source of blessing for others.

Old Testament professor Pat Miller wrote that in the Bible – “Laughter always announces the reversal of our anxieties and fears into joy and relief... Divine laughter overcomes the dangers that threaten God’s rule over our life. More commonly, human laughter enables us to forget ourselves by letting go of what worries us, that ties us up within ourselves, in the uptightness of human life. Comic Relief is just what it claims to be, a relieving of what has become too heavy to bear,” Miller writes. “For most of us, the relief from the

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 153.

⁵ “The Depths of Despair Among US Adults Entering Midlife,” *The American Journal of Public Health*, May, 2019.

strains of ordinary day in and day out existence is found in the possibility of laughter at the end of the day.”⁶

Modern science agrees with the biblical scholar noting that laughter is essential to good health. Laughter not only boosts our mood and diminishes pain, but it also strengthens the immune system and protects us from the damaging effects of stress. Laughter’s release of endorphins increases blood flow, can help better balance the mind and body, can inspire hope and better connects us to others.

A study in Norway found that people with a strong sense of humor outlived those who do not laugh as much. And then there is this interesting scientific intersection with our scripture: At a very primitive level, laughter is intertwined with trust. A deep laugh which raises the head and exposes the neck is a physical sign of trust. We don’t laugh with people who threaten our safety – just the opposite. We laugh with people we trust.

Maybe that’s the ultimate gift of Sarah for us. Her situation – laughable indeed – also begs the question of trust: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Like Sarah and Abraham, our faith in God leads us down paths of an unknown future. Faith is not being sure where we are going, but going anyway. Faith is holding our life up against the promises of God, and when they seem too wonderful to imagine, faith doubles over in laughter.

So when we look around at the world, and see little to laugh about, and feel the rising tide of despair, let us remember Sarah. In due time she did have a baby and named him Isaac. Do you remember what Isaac means? “He laughs!” In her old age, Sarah gave birth to a baby and named him Laughter. It turns out that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord after all. AMEN.

⁶ Pat Miller, *Theology Today*, July 1998, p. 147-51. BBC.com, ScientificAmeircan.com, Forbes Magazine online.