

Laughing with Sarah

Have you ever had a dream or desire, or maybe a promise someone made that you held in your heart and you waited and waited and waited for that dream to come true or that promise to be fulfilled? What happens to us when promises are delayed? The waiting takes a toll. Doubt begins to fill in the cracks that time produces in the foundation of our faith. Did we miss it? Was it not supposed to happen for us? Can we still trust the one who made the promise? If we can still laugh at the future, our laughter has a bitter and cynical ring to it. There is not much to laugh at as we finally give up on the long delayed promise.

Turn with me to Genesis 18 and I want us to look at a fascinating story in the Old Testament about waiting and laughter. Just in case you're unfamiliar with the story, let me quickly give you some background. In Genesis 12 God speaks to a man named Abram and tells him he plans to make him and his descendants into a great nation and will bless those who bless him and will curse those who curse him and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through him. He tells him to take his family and go to a land which God will show him. Abram takes his wife, Sarai, leaves home and starts on this journey. The bible tells us Sarah was a beautiful woman.

(Picture of young Sarah) Picture by Abel Pann

In Genesis 15 God tells Abram to look up into the sky. He tells him his descendants will be as the stars in the sky, yet Abram and Sarai were childless. God tells Abram it will be a son of his flesh, but the years are going by and still no child. Abram has a son with Sarai's servant, Hagar, but this was not the son God had promised to give him and it only causes domestic trouble and unrest.

Genesis 17 the Bible says the Lord appeared to Abram and changed his name. His name, Abram, meant "exalted father". It really was probably referring back to his father, to the past. But God said from now on you will be called Abraham which means "father of many." And Sarai will be called Sarah (both names mean princess), but she will not just be a princess, she will be the mother of nations and kings will come from her. And God told Abraham, **"I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her."**

Genesis 17:16

And here is Abraham's response. **"Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and**

said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’ Genesis 17:17 Abraham laughed at the idea because it seemed so preposterous. The idea of a 100 year old man and his 90 year old wife having a baby does seem laughable but most of all it just seems impossible.

That gives us some background for what happens in Genesis 18. Abraham is resting in the shade at the entrance to his tent, escaping from the afternoon heat when suddenly he is aware of three men standing nearby. They just seem to have appeared. In typical Eastern and Bedouin hospitality, he bowed and offered them food and water and lodging. It was the custom to provide much more than first offered. The idea was that by offering food, rest and water, you could make a friend of a potential enemy.

(Abraham bowing before the three visitors)

Time didn't seem to be a problem as they rested and waited for a calf to be prepared and bread to be kneaded and baked. (Three seahs of flour was about 20 quarts. Sarah baked a lot of bread and they killed a calf and prepared and barbecued it.) While they ate, the bible says Abraham stood near them under a tree and watched. He must have been wondering who these guys were, where did they come from, and what was their purpose in coming to his tent. Finally, they asked where his wife Sarah was. He told them she was in the tent. The bible says, **“Then the Lord said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.’” Genesis 18:10.**

So many questions I have about this that really aren't that important to the message. But you can't help but wonder if Abraham recognized the speaker. The Lord had appeared to him in chapter 17 when he changed his name. Did Abraham recognize him when he came to him in chapter 18? Or was his appearance different? Perhaps Genesis 17 was a vision but this time there was a physical appearance. There were three men this time and only the Lord himself in chapter 17. Perhaps it was his voice, the voice he had heard so many years ago when the Lord first told him to leave his home and go to this land of promise. The voice that had told him he would be the father of a nation. The voice of the one who had promised him a child with his wife Sarah. And now he re-affirms that promise, again after all of these years.

The bible tells us that Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent. Look at

this passage in Genesis 18:11-15. **“Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of child-bearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’ Then the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.’ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh.’ But he said, ‘Yes, you did laugh.’” Genesis 18:11-15**

Sarah laughed. But it wasn't a joyful laugh. Here was this promise, presented to them again. Abraham and Sarah had both heard this promise before. “You will have a son with Sarah”. How many times would she hear that and get her hopes up only to have them dashed again, month after month. Enough already! She had heard this story for years. Now she is 90 years old. She had long since given up hope about having a child. It hurt for a long time, to be childless, but finally the pain and anger had mellowed into disappointment and finally to resignation and a bleak cynicism.

To hear it again, “you will have a son” now that your husband is 100 and you are 90, perhaps sounded more like a cruel joke, like the visitors were mocking her the way the presence of Hagar and Ishmael had mocked her. So she laughed, but it was the laugh of the scoffer, the cynic, the disappointed. It was the laugh of one who just didn't see how she could risk the pain of hoping again for a child.

And the bible says Sarah laughed to herself. I think it was a “yeah, right” kind of a laugh. “Sure, after I am old and worn out we are going to have a child. That's a laugh all right. Good one. Real funny. Thanks for coming by to entertain us.”

In a book by Frederick Buechner entitled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*, Buechner talks about what made Sarah laugh and what makes anyone laugh. He says two elements typically go into making things funny: **Incongruity and surprise**. The two things kind of go together. If something is incongruent, it means it doesn't seem to fit, two or three things just don't seem to go together, they are out of place. When we are surprised by the incongruence, we laugh. It's the unexpected twist in the plot. It's when we expect one thing that seems to fit and something totally unexpected is produced.

Thursday evening I was pulling up weeds in the gigantic flowerbeds we have at our house. I know the idea of me crawling on my knees pulling up weeds is incongruent for some of you. One of the trees in the front yard doesn't seem to be as healthy as it should be and I went over to take a look at it. I'm reaching up into the tree, examining a couple of branches when suddenly a locust - ciccada, whatever you want to call it, started that noise they make. It startled me so much that I jumped back and stumbled several feet before landing flat on my back in the front yard. Now if you had been watching out the window and suddenly saw me go from calmly looking at a tree to staggering back 7 feet and then falling, you would have laughed. It is based on the surprise of parts that just don't fit. "Wonder why that guy out in his yard just went crazy and fell down?"

Let me give you one more silly example. I love those preachers whose eyesight is good but have to use reading glasses to read the Scripture. It just goes with age. I need my glasses to see in every direction at this point. But if I got up to preach and told everyone to turn to Genesis 18 and then said, excuse me while I put on my reading glasses, and then I put these on. You would most likely laugh. It seems incongruent with what we are doing and it took you by surprise. It is not what you could or would expect from the pastor on Sunday morning.

Sarah laughed because this idea of her having a child was incongruous, preposterous, absurd, physically impossible. But she didn't laugh because she was surprised. She was 90 and Abraham was 100 and 90 and 100 year old people don't like surprises. They don't laugh at surprises. There aren't that many things left that can surprise them. They've already been there and done that. Sarah expected no further surprises in her life. Nothing much out of her ordinary world. She had no expectations of God coming on the scene and changing her circumstances. Not this late in the day. She was too old to keep on believing and hoping for the surprises yet to come.

So Sarah laughed the laugh of the cynic. Without the element of surprise, no longer believing in or for the unexpected, for God's intervention, then the incongruence of the visitor's words just confirm what she already suspects, that life is truly unfair and too often life just seems to mock your hopes and dreams.

But Sarah had missed something in the visitor's words. She can hear him say,

“Your wife will bear a son to you this time next year” but she couldn’t hear him say, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” That’s what she missed. Sarah needed to hear God’s word again. She needed to let the element of surprise back into her life because God wasn’t finished surprising Sarah.

Sarah, you need to hear the words again. And you need to risk giving an answer to the visitor’s question. **“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”** The question demands an answer from all of us.

Is anything too hard for God? If your answer is “Yes. Some things are just too much, too hard, too complex, too difficult for God to handle” – then everything kind of shuts down, doesn’t it? God is no longer God. There is no place for surprise, no place for hope, no place for miracles.

But if your answer is “No. Absolutely nothing is too hard for the Lord” – then the possibilities are endless aren’t they? Anything can happen. Surprise comes back into your life whether you are nine or ninety. Something miraculous could be just around the corner. Hope floods back into your life, back into your thinking, dreams come alive again.

If some things are too hard for God, then you laugh along with Sarah, the laugh of the cynic, the one who can’t or won’t be surprised, the laugh of one who won’t risk hoping again. But if nothing is too hard for God, then you laugh the laughter of the hope-filled. You laugh with Abraham – “All right! We’re gonna have a baby! A son! I may be a hundred but I’ve still got what it takes. I’m gonna be a father. Call me Abraham. Father of a nation. Are you kidding? I’m just getting started!”

Let God fill your life with laughter. Open your heart to the possibility of surprise, the serendipity of a life lived with Jesus. Is anything too hard for God? Surprise! Absolutely nothing is too hard for him.

Verse 12 tells us Sarah had laughed to herself and had only thought this thought about being so old, she hadn’t said anything. But the visitor knew her thoughts. Sarah is caught by surprise, at 90. “He knew my thoughts. He knew my doubts. He knew my fear.”

Verse 15 says “Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.” She was afraid because she had been caught. She was afraid because her doubt and

unbelief had been exposed, so she did all she knew to do, she tried to cover it up. “I didn’t laugh.” And the Lord said, “Oh but you did. You stopped believing. You stopped hoping. You stopped being surprised by my grace and mercy. Yes, you did laugh. And Sarah, you will laugh again. And you will keep on laughing. And this time not the laugh of the cynic, not a sneer born out of a disappointed heart. No, this time next year you will throw back your head and laugh the laughter of the blessed. You will laugh the laughter of one joyfully taken by surprise.

Hebrews 11 tells us the rest of the story. The NIV misses it here in the translation. But King James and NAS translate it correctly. **“By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; therefore, also there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, ‘as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore’.”**

Hebrews 11:11-12

Sarah hoped again. Sarah, although she was 90, decided to trust the words of the Lord again. It wasn’t too late. It all seemed incongruous, none of it seemed to fit, the timing was all wrong, it should have been years ago. She would be raising a teenager when she was past 100. Where would she find maternity clothes for a 90 year old? But Sarah chose to believe it again. She considered Him faithful who had promised. Nothing about this seemed possible, but if God said it, then she would believe it.

And look at Genesis 21. **“Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him...Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me’. And she added, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’”** Genesis 21:1-7

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter.” What a wonderful phrase. They named their son Isaac which means, “He laughs.” This time Sarah was laughing with God, not at God. This time Sarah was smiling the sweet smile of those surprised by

grace, surprised by joy.

I bought this collection of pictures in Israel because of this one picture really. I loved the twinkle in her eyes, the smile, the laughter that breaks across her face. Have you ever wondered what a 90 year old mother to be looks like?

(Sarah old and smiling).

Imagine the scene everywhere Sarah and Abraham went with Isaac. Imagine the baby pictures in the album. One author said Sarah had one foot in the grave and one foot in the maternity ward. We laugh because it is incongruous. We laugh because we are surprised. We laugh because we too believe in and celebrate God's faithfulness. We believe that he will keep his promises to us as well even if we are 90 or 100 years old. God will still honor his promise.

May I tell you, for someone today, there is laughter ahead for you. God hasn't run out of surprises for you. Not yet. Everything may not be adding up right now in your life. All the pieces may not fit just yet. Trust God. Consider him faithful. Wait for his timing. He has a plan and he is going to bring you laughter, just you wait and see.

"God has brought me laughter", Sarah said. I believe he will bring it to you as well. Wait in hope for the laughter that comes as we honor God. As Sarah finally did, consider the faithfulness of the one who has promised to go with you.