

Holy Laughter  
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 Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7



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

*21 The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. <sup>2</sup> Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. <sup>3</sup> Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. <sup>4</sup> And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. <sup>5</sup> Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. <sup>6</sup> Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." <sup>7</sup> And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."*

Laughter is good, and apparently, it is good for you. The Mayo clinic reports that laughter: enhances the intake of oxygen-rich air which stimulates your heart, lungs, and muscles, and increases endorphins released by the brain; fires up and the cools down our stress response, making you feel more relaxed; and stimulates circulation and aids muscle relaxation. Over the long term laughter may even improve the immune system, relieve pain, increase personal satisfaction, and lessen anxiety and depression.<sup>1</sup> It does not appear that the benefits are different whether the laugh is a full-bellied laugh of exuberance, or a laugh that begins in disbelief. Both fit the bill. Laughter is good.

Whether joy-filled or scoffing, Sarah no doubt needed to have a good laugh, about the ridiculous promise that we heard in the scripture. Which was actually only the latest installment in a series of ridiculous promises.<sup>2</sup> In chapter 12 of Genesis, where the bible introduces Abraham and Sarah. Abraham, who is 75, and Sarah, ten years his junior are living with their families in their homeland when they are called by God to leave all and go to a land they have never seen.

With that call comes the first promises: God promises that Abraham will have many descendants and that he will be a “great nation” (12:2); God promises that Abraham and his descendants will inherit the land of Canaan (12:7); and God promises that this family will be a blessing to the whole world (12:3). The bible does not record that they laughed at any of those promises, though they might have.

For Sarah was barren. It’s hard to be the ancestor of a “great nation” if you don’t have even one child. But instead of just laughing, Abraham and Sarah try to help God out. Before today’s story rolls around, Sarah has “given” Hagar, her handmaid, to Abraham as a concubine. And Hagar has given birth to Abraham’s only son, Ishmael. So perhaps Abraham and Sarah thought, “Problem solved. No cause for giggling or scoffing, y’all.”

But then, in Genesis 17, God comes again to Abraham and insists that although he has big plans for Ishmael, nevertheless, it is through Sarah that God’s blessing will be fulfilled. Now, by this time, Sarah is 90 years old. And at the thought of Sarah bearing a child in their golden years, Abraham falls on his face laughing. Now a bit later that day, things likely got a lot less jovial, for that was when Abraham institutes the practice of circumcision for all of the men of his household, as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham’s family. I’m pretty sure no laughter was heard right after that evening.

But the very next day comes today’s story. Abraham is sitting under the Oaks of Mamre, likely recovering from his surgical procedure the day before, when he sees three men approaching in the heat of the day. Abraham seems somehow to know that they are no ordinary strangers. Because, while hospitality is quite literally a matter of life and death in that semi-arid climate, Abraham goes above and beyond the call of duty in his hosting of these guests. He moves as fast as his 100-year-old legs will carry him: running to meet them, bowing down to the ground, running to the tent to tell Sarah to whip up a good dinner, running to the herd to get the best meat. Abraham spreads a really good feast before the strangers. They eat and then ask, “Where is your wife Sarah?” As it turns out, Sarah is eavesdropping on the conversation from inside the tent entrance. And when the visitor promises that she will bear a son in her old age, Sarah, like Abraham before her, laughs, and says to herself, “Seriously? Now? Yeah, right – good one!” (This is a loose translation.) Then the LORD (who has been disguised as these strangers, as it turns out) asks Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

That is a real question, isn’t it? It is the same question that the angel posed to Sarah’s descendent, Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well, who wondered at the announcement of her own child’s birth. Is anything too wonderful, too hard, too difficult for the Lord? It is a question that echoes down to us today. We might look at the world around us or look at our own lives, throw up our hands, chuckle and scoff and say, “apparently so.”

Peace. Justice. Equity. Health. Wholeness. Hope.

These seem too wonderful, too hard, too difficult – impossible for God. It was Sarah, and it is for us in our day. Are we allowed to say that here? Here in church? I almost forgot that here we are supposed to believe all kinds of things that seem impossible. God can give life to the dead<sup>3</sup>; God can bring light from the darkness; God can create something out of nothing. We say all kinds of laughable things here, that when we are here, faced with the cross seem somehow not quite so funny.

The presence of the holy stranger and the hilarity of the promises must have made Sarah forget that she was eavesdropping for she broke in, protesting vehemently, “I did not laugh.”

But she did. And so often we do, too. And that is okay. It doesn't seem like God was particularly angry or disappointed or upset with Sarah. I almost imagine that the holy stranger was kind of laughing himself when he responded, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

I think that God knows that the things that God longs for us and for the world sound laughable. And yet, through the ages, God keeps saying them: to matriarchs and patriarchs, to judges and kings, to the faithful and the doubtful, through poets and prophets, through God incarnate in Christ, through the Spirit speaking through the church. Saying that ordinary things and people are sacred, that no one is beyond the love and embrace of God. Saying that there is mystery in everyday life: in the flight of the bumblebee, the cry of a newborn, a meal shared among friends. Saying that there is more to this life than what you can see, hold, and buy. Saying that an empty tomb changes everything: that hope overcomes despair, compassion is stronger than power, and death does not have the last word. Laughable.

Over the course of nine months, while Sarah held the ridiculous promise of God within her womb, I think that Sarah's laughter was transformed from scoffing, skeptical laughter to full-throated laughs of joy.

I think we need laughter. We are a serious people. We live in a time that has serious problems. We live in a place that is hard-wired to respond in serious ways. It can be, frankly, exhausting. I wonder what would happen if we took a cue from our ancestors Sarah and Abraham - if we laughed, a bit more. I wonder if we could do that, too? If we could hold the promises that are proclaimed here – the laughable promises of freely given grace and the empty tomb and the pouring out of the babbling Spirit. Hold those promises within us, lightly, with skepticism perhaps, but also hope. Hold them and let them grow and form within us until it is born into our lives and into our world as something that is the embodiment of the laughable, grace-filled promises of God.

I wonder if we could invite others to join us and our family could grow in holy laughter: not a laughter that denies the pain and the suffering of the world, but hopes in spite of it. Not a joy that denies that our hope seems laughable, but chooses to remain joyful nonetheless. Not a lightness that denies that heaviness and pain is real, but claims lightness anyway. I wonder if we could, in the words of Wendell Berry, practice resurrection until it is fully born for us – for all. I wonder, who would be laughing then? I wonder if it might not be everyone. I wonder if the sound of holy laughter just might be the soundtrack of God's coming new day.

And now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Mayo Clinic, “April 21, 2016. Stress relief from laughter? It's no joke.” <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456?pg=2>

<sup>2</sup> The synopsis of Abraham and Sarah's narrative borrows heavily from Kathryn M. Schifferdecker's Commentary on Genesis 18:1-15 [21:1-7]. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3301](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3301)

<sup>3</sup> Portions of the ridiculous promises of God are taken from David Lose's “Easter is Coming,” April 1, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c2inXKD6PI>