

“God made Sarah laugh”

Genesis 18:1-15

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While it is still early in the New Year of 2021, I have decided to preach a sermon about laughter. Laughter is something I am very familiar with, and apparently laughter is something with which I have a fair modicum of success. I have had numerous people tell me that when I tell jokes or funny stories during my sermon, someone always laughs. Not sometimes, not many times, not most of the time, but always. Somebody always laughs when I tell a joke or a funny story. I think that is an amazing feat that displays my profound grasp of humor and comedy. When I tell a joke or a funny story, someone always laughs. Unfortunately, when people tell me that, they usually follow it up by saying, “You are the one who always laughs.” Perhaps justifiably so, I have developed a tarnished reputation as someone who always laughs at their own jokes. Oh well, even if it is just me, at least someone always laughs. Laughter is a good thing.

But laughter can be hard to come by when you face a tough crowd. Today, we have a tough crowd, a woman named Sarah. Sarah is a familiar figure in the bible. She is the wife of Abraham. She was alongside Abraham when he received the call from God way back in Genesis 11, back when Abraham was Abram and Sarah was Sarai, back when God said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” With nothing but the promise that God would bless them, Abram and Sarai pulled up their stakes and followed the call of God. That call had come to Abram and Sarai some 25 years before, and now we come upon Sarah, as she is now known, as she sits inside their tent as Abraham welcomes three visitors and provides them with a welcome and some warm hospitality.

This same Sarah, the one sitting inside the tent as her husband goes out of his way to lighten the burden of the three travelers, is the one who is a tough crowd. Making Sarah laugh is no easy task. You see, over the

course of those 25 years following the call of God and the promise of God's blessing, life has dealt Sarah one disappointment after another. She and Abraham have been through times that would try the strongest of marriages. Our introduction to Sarah in Genesis 11 includes a verse that identifies why laughter will not come easily with Sarah. We are told in a straightforward fashion, "Now Sarai was childless, because she was not able to conceive." (Genesis 11:30) Ouch. There is nothing funny about that, is there? If that was the only cross Sarai had to bear, that in itself would be plenty of heartache.

But over the course of the next 25 years her pain is multiplied. Twice when she and Abraham travel into foreign lands she plays along with the request of Abraham that she tell everyone she is just his sister. Somehow that is safer for Abraham. But what a difficult situation to put Sarah in. In Egypt Pharaoh takes her into his palace, only to discover through a series of diseases that plague his house that he has indeed taken Abraham's wife into his palace. A similar thing will happen a second time with the king of Gerar. Ha ha ha...she is just my sister. Ha ha ha...no, she's really my wife. Ha ha ha. Any laughter through these bizarre episodes would be forced at best.

And yet these charades about being Abraham's sister are not the most serious struggles Sarah faces. That whole reality of being childless follows her each step of life's journey. That struggle is made more agonizing because along the way God promises that Abraham will have a child who is his own flesh and blood. Sarah is aware of this promise, and when she continues to be unable to conceive, to bear Abraham a child who is his own flesh and blood, she turns to her own act of manipulation. She gives her maidservant to Abraham with the hope Hagar can bear Abraham a son. Unfortunately, when that proves successful, deep feelings of jealousy rise within Sarah and her heartache worsens. Finally, nearly 25 years after they first followed the Lord, when Abraham is nearing 100 years of age and Sarah is 90, God raises the stakes and says that the flesh and blood that will be born to Abraham will be born through Sarah. Sarah, at her old and advanced age, will become pregnant and bear Abraham a son. But as the story unfolds, the

promise remains unfulfilled. Abraham remains without his promised son. And Sarah remains childless and unable to conceive. Yeah, I think it is safe to say, Sarah would be a tough crowd. Getting Sarah to laugh would be no easy task.

You might think because Sarah is such a central figure in the bible, she would find humor in some of these biblical interpretations that come from children. Sarah, did you know that children have said these things about the bible...

- Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree.
- Noah's wife was called Joan of Ark.
- Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.
- Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol.
- The people who followed the Lord were called the 12 decibels.
- The epistles were the wives of the apostles.
- St. Paul cavorted to Christianity. He preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage.
- A Christian should have only one spouse. This is called monotony.

This childish humor might amuse us, but Sarah does not even acknowledge such weak attempts at tickling her funnybone.

Maybe some church bulletin bloopers can crack her façade. I'm not sure I believe these were really printed in an actual church bulletin, but who knows. With these bloopers, no one is exempt from a humorous jab.

- Not the men of the church. "Ladies don't forget the rummage sale. It is a good chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands."
- Not those who are feeling discouraged. "The Low Self-Esteem Group will meet Thursday at 7 pm. Please use the back door."
- Not the ushers of the church. Once there was the omission of a single letter in the bulletin, leading to this announcement. "The ushers will eat latecomers." It's supposed to be "Seat latecomers". The ushers will eat latecomers. Wink, wink, nod, nod...get it

Sarah. “Eat latecomers.” Nothing. Just a shake of that old woman’s head. Nothing.

- No one is exempt. Not even the singers of the church. “Miss Charlene Mason sang, ‘I will not pass this way again,’ giving obvious pleasure to the congregation.

No one is exempt. No one I tell you. Not even the pastor.

- “The pastor would appreciate it if the ladies of the congregation would lend him their electric girdles for the pancake breakfast next Sunday morning.” I’m pretty sure that pastor wanted griddles, although I wouldn’t be surprised if an eager congregation showered him with an abundant offering of girdles.

But it is not girdles and griddles that comprise the majority of bloopers regarding the pastor. No, those bloopers focus on preaching. As in...

- The Reverend Merriwether spoke briefly, much to the delight of the congregation.
- The pastor will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, “Break forth into joy.”
- And finally, “During the absence of our pastor, we enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing a good sermon.”

Admittedly, many of these bloopers are clunkers. Nevertheless, some of them are at least worthy of a chuckle. Wouldn’t you agree, Sarah? Nope. Sarah would not agree.

How do you get someone to laugh, when for a whole lifetime they have been childless and unable to conceive, when for the last 25 years they have chased a promise that has not been fulfilled, when for the last 25 years their days have been filled with one disappointment after another? Maybe the question is not “How do you get someone like Sarah to laugh?” Maybe the question is, “Can you get someone like Sarah to laugh?”

I wonder how many of you can relate to Sarah. I wonder if after nearly a year of this Coronavirus all of us can relate to Sarah. This year

has been difficult. In many ways it has been devastating. I give thanks that through it all you have persevered, you have kept going, you have dug deep, you have kept putting one foot in front of the other. But boy, it feels like we have all suffered and struggled and seen so many hopes and dreams go by the wayside. The angst and anxiety and despair and even depression is not the type of thing a funny joke or a bulletin blooper can cure. Those types of things might get a chuckle, a roll your eyes kind of giggle, but when life becomes a string of disappointment, whether it a year of Coronavirus or the 25 years of Sarah's struggle, we really do begin to wonder if there can ever be laughter.

Beginning today and carrying on through the spring I am going to preach a series of sermons about people of faith, people like Sarah, people we meet in the pages of the bible. My first thought was to title the series, "Profiles in faith." In a sense each of the sermons will be exactly that, a profile of a person of faith. As we look at Sarah this morning, each Sunday we will study the profile of other persons of faith. But I decided not to call this series, "Profiles in faith." Instead, I am calling this series, "Partners in faith." You see, my hope is that we would not simply look at these people of faith who fill the pages of the bible and see their profile of faith. My hope is that as we examine the faith of ones in the bible, we will recognize they are our partners in faith. Their experiences can be our experiences. As Sarah struggled to find laughter, we can come alongside her and not only learn from her experience we can also share her experience. This morning, with Sarah as our partner of faith, hear this good news. A woman who had no reason to laugh, and perhaps had every reason not to laugh, this woman named Sarah laughed. How? God made Sarah laugh.

Stuck inside her tent, surrounded by 25 years of sorrow, suffering, and sadness, Sarah overheard God say to Abraham, "I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Sarah, stuck inside her tent, was listening to this conversation between God and Abraham. And when she heard what God said, Sarah laughed. If this was all that happened in the story, you would be right in thinking her laughter is more of a mocking laughter. "Okay, sure, right, after I am

worn out and my husband Abraham is old, now we are going to have a son?” The laughter that day in the tent probably was not sincere laughter. But what happened that day in the tent is not all that happened. Turning a few pages in the bible we read in Genesis 20 that the Lord was gracious to Sarah, and the Lord did what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham, just as God had promised. They named the son Isaac, a name which just so happens to mean laughter. And then Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” (Genesis 20:1-6) Now the laughter of Sarah is true laughter, heartfelt laughter, deep laughter, joyful laughter, and hope-filled laughter.

Stuck inside our homes, now nearly 10 months into the Coronavirus, listening to this story about a woman who had suffered and struggled for 25 years, overhearing a story about a woman 90 years old having a baby, maybe we are tempted to laugh a mocking type of laugh just like Sarah did. “Sure God, right, okay, but really...” Could God do such a miracle in our midst? Could God do such a miracle in our life, in our world? Could God reach into the darkness of this pandemic and bring laughter? And the answer has to be yes. After all, God made Sarah laugh. God can reach into the darkness of this pandemic and bring laughter.

Wednesday, November 18th was one of our most anticipated days of the past year, the year 2020. We had made plans months before to fly the next day, Thursday, November 19th, to Houston, Texas, where we would meet up with all of our kids. We would have a big family Thanksgiving Celebration. Then, and this part was pretty exciting to me, we would stay through my birthday, December 4th, and all of our kids would be with me to celebrate my 60th birthday. We rose early on Wednesday, November 18th. We had our bags all packed. I filled our car with gas in anticipation of the drive to the airport. Julie took our dog Bullseye to Creature Comforts, where she would spend a couple weeks with her canine counterparts. Oh my, we were so ready to see family. But we were also concerned about traveling. In fact, for days on end the health experts kept saying do not travel, do not gather with family in big

groups, lay low for the Holidays. Well, I think most of you know as the day wore on, the day before we were set to travel, the doubts multiplied, and sometime in the afternoon Julie called crying and said, “I don’t think we should go.” I agreed. We let the kids know, and the balloon of hope rapidly deflated. That evening I came home to unpack my suitcase.

Julie was on a Facetime call with our son Jake. Jake and Bridget are the ones who are the parents of Clara Jean Eberly, our beloved granddaughter, who if truth be told was actually the one we were most excited to see again after nearly a year. Seeing her bright smiling face on the Facetime call was almost more than I could handle. It broke my heart. Still, Julie called me over to the phone and I put on a fake smile. I’m Bubba, and Clara likes Bubba to have a smile. Well, as I did my best to smile at Clara and hide my disappointment, Julie kept jabbing me in the side with her elbow. Clara was saying something, which I couldn’t understand. She was saying something about what she was holding in her hand, which I couldn’t make out. Frankly, I was lost in my sadness and disappointment. Finally, Julie helped me understand. “She’s saying baby.” Baby? Baby? And then I realized in little Clara’s hands was a picture of an ultrasound, and on that ultrasound was the image of what we would soon discover was going to be Clara’s baby brother. Guess what? On that darkest and most disappointing day of 2020, the day we canceled plans to visit our kids, a day when I was so down in the dumps, I didn’t really even want to talk to anyone, as our granddaughter held this precious picture of her baby brother, I laughed. God made me laugh, and I cannot describe to you what an incredible blessing that laughter was...at just that moment. Can God make us laugh? Again, I say to you, “God made Sarah laugh.”

This year of wearing masks has reminded me numerous times of watching my dad lose his battle with a progressive disease. Ironically, one of the effects of that progressive disease was called masking. The disease took away his ability to show any emotion on his face. His face literally became a mask, a fixed expression hiding all his feelings and emotion. As his life drew to an end, my dad could no longer smile. And my dad could no longer laugh.

Take away the ability to walk. Take away the ability to talk. Take away the ability to eat, even the ability to go to the bathroom. That was all bad enough. But don't take away his smile. Don't take away his laugh. Not that beaming smile that would light up at a good joke (or even a bad one), the smile that would ignite when he saw one of his grandchildren, the self-effacing smile that would recognize when he had goofed up or been had by one of our countless pranks. Give us the smile. Let us hear his laughter.

But the disease took the smile. The disease took his laughter. And that hurt.

And then when my dad died, I saw my dad smile again. I heard my dad laugh again. His death brought together a wonderful group of family and friends, ones who dropped their plans and came to our little hometown at great cost and sacrifice. That meant so much to me and my family. Every person who came to share with us in our grief was an incredible gift and blessing. But I don't think I can describe what it meant when dad himself walked into our backyard the night before we had his memorial service. Yes, you heard me right. My dad walked into our backyard the night before we had his memorial service. We were all gathered together, and he walked right into the back yard....not once, but twice. His younger brothers, Uncle Roger and Uncle Herb flew in from Ohio. When they walked into our back yard it was like seeing my dad in his prime. Their faces were full of expression. They were telling jokes like my dad. They both went through the food line like my dad used to go through the food line, filling his plate till it overflowed. They both smiled, just like my dad. And they both laughed, oh did they laugh. They laughed just like my dad. That night, gathered with my family, I was drinking a glass of wine, but to paraphrase an old rock and roll song, "It wasn't wine I had too much of it was a double shot of my father's love." And as I watched my uncles laugh like my dad used to laugh, guess what I did? I think you know what I did. I laughed and rejoiced and remembered all the blessings of the wonderful man my father had been.

The Coronavirus has put us in a tough spot. We have spent ten months in perpetual crisis, experiencing loss and sadness in wave upon wave. Can God make us laugh? Can God make us laugh like God made Sarah laugh?

Some women woke up one morning convinced they would never laugh again. They went to the tomb of their dear friend to anoint his body for burial. Knowing what they had been through, knowing how they watched their beloved friend and their beloved Lord suffer and die, we share their grief. We doubt they will ever laugh again. But you know what happened that day, don't you? The tomb was empty. More importantly, Jesus was alive, raised from the dead. And although the bible doesn't say it in these exact words, I can guarantee you those women laughed that day, the laugh of knowing that with God, all things are possible...the laugh that knows life conquers death...that laugh that rejoices in the victory of Jesus Christ. That kind of laughter is stronger than any virus, that kind of laughter spreads wider than any pandemic, that kind of laughter reaches into the deepest pit of despair, and that kind of laughter shines into the darkest corners of our broken hearts. As you and I face the ongoing challenges of this Coronavirus and all the hardship that comes with it, remember this. When you are about to give up and abandon all hope, remember this, "God made Sarah laugh." God made Sarah laugh.

Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!