

“Divine Laughter”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Genesis 17:4-5, 15-21; 18:1-15; 21:1-7

September 15, 2019 - Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Our second reading comes from four chunks of chapters 17 and 18 of the book of Genesis. Adam and Eve and Noah and the Tower of Babel are in our rear view mirror. Five chapters earlier, God chose a man named Abram to enter into a covenant with, promising him descendants as numerous as the stars. At the time, Abram was seventy-five years old, and his wife Sarai just a bit younger, and they didn't have any children. It turns out that their retirement adventure would mean traveling in service to this God who has made them a promise.

The account of Abram and Sarai — who will become Abraham and Sarah shortly — can be acrid to modern palates, and with good reason. We find in this story — and its interpretation up to this very day, and, frankly, in lots of other thinking outside this story — a problematic connection made between fertility and faithfulness. In this ancient (and, sadly, modern) view, a woman who does not give birth to a child is described as “barren” and seen as less-than-complete. Of course, nothing is ever said about the man, both due to a lack of biology textbooks and, you know, patriarchy. Though, as we'll see, Sarah will take her swipe at the patriarchy!

We are better informed now about science, but also about faithfulness:

We know that faithful people have children.

We know that faithful people struggle with infertility.

We know that faithful people choose not to have children.

We know that adopted children are precisely as much a family's beloved child as any other child.

We know that stepparents can be a gift from God.

We know that love transcends blood and genes and that for many of us it's chosen family that carries the mark of the sacred.

And we know that unfaithful and cruel people can be highly reproductive.

So, as we reject such a one-to-one connection between faithfulness and childbirth, we have a choice. We can cast stories like this one into the wilderness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, or we can see whether there is something to reclaim, to rejoice about, to receive in them, as we name loudly and clearly a theology that has been destructive and say, “That is not the God — Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer — that we know.”

After ten years of moving about and waiting on God's promise, Sarai and Abram hatch a plan. Sarai will hand her Egyptian servant, Hagar, over to Abram, and maybe they'll get one of those descendants that way. But a pregnant Hagar flees after she and Sarai have a falling out. Hagar is visited in the wilderness by an angel and told to return. The son born to Hagar is named Ishmael.

Well, all of that is pretty obviously problematic too, but that's for another day. I'm going to be reading this story in pieces and commenting as we go. Our account picks up about thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, and Sarai and Abram are still waiting to see how this great nation will be born. Hear God's Word to us from the book of Genesis:

[God said to Abram:] “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

God has changed Abram’s name, which means “exalted father,” to “Abraham,” which means “exalted father of a multitude.” Depending on how you look at it, God is either underlining the promise or rubbing it in Abraham’s face. We continue:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!”

God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.”

God has commanded that the child be named “Isaac” — and, now, you’re going to make a big deal about this, but “Isaac” is made up of the same letters as the verb “to laugh.” So his name literally means “he laughs” or “laughter.” Onward!

The LORD [YHWH] appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 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. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 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.”

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

Now, Abraham gets a lot of credit here from preachers for providing such abundant hospitality to these strangers, but we do need to note that Sarah and the servant do most of the work. That said, three measures of choice flour makes a whole lot of bread. Now the story takes a turn:

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” 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. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it

had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”

Sarah, through the millennia, speaking up and wondering if Abraham is up to the task! This next piece sounds very different depending on the tone in which God speaks. I have zero way of knowing how it was said, so I’m going to read it twice:

The LORD said to Abraham, [with anger] “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ [incredulously] 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.”
But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid.
God said, [fuming] “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

The LORD said to Abraham, [with delighted laughter] “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ [with wonder] 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.”
But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid.
God said, [playfully] “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

I favor the second reading, but what do I know?

Here’s the last piece, and do note who the main character of this paragraph is and who does all the speaking:

The LORD dealt with Sarah as God had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as God had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”
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.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

On September 29th, 2001 at 11:30 p.m., Eastern, the world watched as New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani addressed the nation from studio 8H at Rockefeller Center. He was surrounded by firefighters and police officers and he gave a heartfelt tribute to the heroes of the past eighteen days. Then Paul Simon sang a bone-chilling rendition of “The Boxer” to a studio filled with reverent silence. After the song, the camera panned back to the mayor, who was now joined by Saturday Night Live creator Lorne Michaels. Giuliani spoke about how important it was to have New York’s institutions up and running and told Michaels that SNL was one of those institutions, and so it was important to do the show that night.

Lorne Michaels sheepishly asked, “Can we be funny?”

And Giuliani replied, “Why start now?”

This week I failed at using the search bar on the Bible website I use. I searched for “laughter” and was surprised to learn that the word is used 144 times from Genesis to Revelation! “A gross of laughter!” I thought.

And then I started looking at the entries and realized my mistake. Only nine of those verses used the word “laughter.” The other 135 were instances in which those letters were lined up in order, but within the word “slaughter.”

Ah.

Truly, many of those were in descriptions about preparing the altar sacrifices, but still, my heart sank. Then I remembered that old joke about how the Jewish festivals, major and minor, can all be summed up in three short sentences:

They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat.

Of course there is “laughter” within “slaughter!” In our Worship Reflection class, we’re often reminding each other that the Jewish people just have a better sense of humor than Christians. They’ve had to.

Over the summer we studied the book of Daniel in Sunday School. Daniel is about oppression, about the clenched fist of the empire, and about wondering when God will keep the holy promise to rescue the people from exile. And in that book of terrifying prophetic visions we found not-so-subtle mocking of arrogant rulers who cannot see their own faults. We found cartoonish villain buffoons cracking us up. We found a king who got so scared by a message from God that he had an accident in his royal garments right there in the middle of a banquet.

The language of these ancient texts is so playful, with names like “he laughs” and “Dusty” [Adam]. Jesus, in his sparring with the Pharisees and his parables, is playful in a way that we miss so often, even as he is stone cold serious about the injustice and failure to love that he sees.

These texts aren’t filled with comedy in spite of tragedy, but rather in response to it. When the world is a circus — be it weird mind-reading visitors to your tent or foolish kings or the “peace” of Rome or every single day in Washington — created in the image of God, we laugh.

Slaughter is not funny.

Oppression is not funny.

Injustice is not funny.

Death is not funny.

Infertility is not funny.

Suffering is not funny.

The earth *literally* burning up as the current administration rolls back environmental protections is not funny.

The abject cruelty of “America First” extending to the destruction in the Bahamas is not funny.

And there is callous laughter. But that is not divine laughter.

We find laughter that is divine not because reality is funny, but because reality is so preposterous and out of line with our dreams and our hopes and the world's rejection of holy peace is so foolish and jarring.

They say that you either have to laugh or cry, and I believe the divine answer is, "Why not both?"

First Abraham laughs at the promise. Then Sarah. They have waited. They have walked. We imagine they have wept. And they laugh.

They laugh when God makes promises and keeps kicking the can down the road.

They laugh when they realize they've been following this God who seems both irresistible and possibly unable to keep the covenant.

They laugh when, again and again, God promises the impossible — the truly impossible.

They laugh when it all comes true for them.

They laugh, and the tellers of this story through the generations don't delete the laughter because it's irreverent. They leave it in. They repeat it. They seem to relish it.

Abraham laughs and God keeps going. Sarah laughs, and God keeps going.

And God laughs! God goes with the joke and tells Abraham to name the kid after the laughter.

Y'all laugh more than the average congregation on a Sunday morning, I'm fairly certain. I don't think it's because your pastor is particularly funny or that you are necessarily funnier than the rest of Alabama, though I think you are. You laugh because it is somehow embedded in the DNA of this family that laughter is a proper and holy and joyful response to the preposterous promises we receive and the preposterous promises we make and the preposterously profound sense of love and belonging that y'all have fostered as a community.

I hear laughter when you approach both table and font. I hear laughter in your rejoicing and in your grieving. I hear laughter in your prophetic witness to being an open and inclusive congregation. I hear laughter as you unabashedly welcome children into worship and community life not to be seen-and-not-heard, but as voices that belong in the chorus of praise. We take scripture and promises and redemption and mercy and justice far too seriously to not fall on our faces in fits of grace-filled laughter from time to time.

Laughter is holy and reverent. I know this because laughter is one of the lines on God's identification card. When Moses is having his burning bush encounter near the beginning of the book of Exodus, God says:

"Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [YHWH] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

This pattern, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" — is used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and on into the Gospels a few times as well. We'll talk about Jacob's names next week. But when God wants to be abundantly clear about who is speaking, God says, "I am the God of the exalted father of many, you know, the God of laughter."¹

¹ Thanks to Robert Williamson of the NL:DR Podcast for this insight - <https://nl.dr.podbean.com/e/episode-002-genesis-18-and-21/>

Laughter is right there, in God's name. The ability and need to laugh is in God's very nature.

May this God grant us the courage to laugh at the impossible,
to laugh in the midst of slaughter,
and to laugh in and through the keeping of a promise.

And may God, from outside the tent, catch us laughing. Amen.