

Sermon for June 14, 2020

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Based on Genesis 18 and 22

“Sarah laughed”

Imagine being Sarah that day. You are in your tent going about your daily routine, when your husband Abraham bursts through the entrance, speaking of three men who have come in the name of the Lord that he intends to serve a meal. In response she needs to quickly make very specific cakes with three measures of choice flour. Sarah makes the cakes and stays at the entrance of the tent with her ear to the conversation under the tree. She hears them ask Abraham “Where is your wife Sarah?”

“Why are they asking?” she wonders “Had Abraham told them her name?”

She listens as the men go on “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

Imagine being Sarah, over 90 years old, far past childbearing ability, having lived her whole life longing to bear a child...” For years now she has been living with Abraham after they left their country and kindred to seek out a new land after hearing God’s promise “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” Abraham had stood with the Lord and heard the words “To your offspring I will give this land”.

Imagine being Sarah, after many years and great adventures within this promise, hearing Abraham’s cry to God “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless...” She has felt the pain of her inability to live into the promise before them, she hasn’t been able to get pregnant with a child. Unable to see this promise in action, she has given Abraham her servant woman, Hagar, to bear a child for him. “You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children, it may be that I shall obtain children by her”. She now lives with Abraham’s son Ishmael, born of Hagar...a reminder that she has not yet been the one to bear Abraham a son.

Imagine being Sarah. Abraham was 99 years old when God again spoke “I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you. I will establish my covenant between me and you...” God changed Sarah’s name from Sarai to Sarah when God promised Abraham “I will bless her and more over I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall give rise to nations...she shall bear a son and you shall name him Isaac”. Abraham had fallen on his face and laughed then “Can Sarah who is 90 years old bear a son?”

Imagine being Sarah - Now at this tent she hears the promise again, flooded with a mix of emotions – grief over not yet having a child, resentment that another has borne a son with her husband, angry because she has heard this promise before and yet has just continued to age,

probably filled with self-doubt – questioning her own worthiness. Hearing the visitor’s words, she lets out a laugh, maybe more of a resigned snort coated in doubt, “yeah right”. Maybe her automatic response even surprised her and she was horrified when she realized she had been loud enough to be heard. Maybe her hands flew to her mouth to cover the sound that had escaped. She hears the man say to 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?” She hears the promise again “At the set time I will return to you in due season and Sarah shall have a son”.

In fear she runs from the tent “I did not laugh”.... I did not laugh at the promise of God.

And the man responds.... “Oh yes you did...”

Imagine being Sarah.

God’s promises sound ridiculous, impossible. Can a woman in her 90’s bear a child through which great nations will arise? Why would God choose such a foolish way to bring about God’s work in the world?

Abraham had laughed. Sarah laughed now.

Yet, despite their response to the promise, God is faithful. And in due time Sarah has a child with Abraham and names the child Isaac, which means laughter. And Sarah says “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me”.

Sarah has been given a promise from God: you will bear a son. God speaks reassurance of this promise, over and over again. But Sarah’s human conditions seem to contrast the truth of the promise. She is filled with self-doubt, doubt in her own ability to bear a child, after all they have tried for years. She thinks she needs to help the promise along, even finding a woman to bear a child for her. She thinks the promise must have hit its expiration date when she considers her own age. She has forgotten the truth of the promise is not found in her abilities and solutions but in God’s faithfulness. And when she hears the promise repeated, she laughs...

But it is her *response* to being *called out* that strikes me. The men say “Why did Sarah laugh?” and instead of responding with explanation, instead of confessing, Sarah denies laughing... “I did not laugh”

She feels guilty for laughing. She tries to hide that she has laughed at the promise of God.

But the man knows, God knows how she has responded to the promise.

Yet she still bears a child. God remains faithful despite her response to the promise.

And they name the child “Isaac” which means “laughter”. It would seem like every time she says Isaac’s name she would remember she laughed at God’s promise. But maybe he is named

Isaac so that every time he is named she and others will remember that despite their response to God's promise, God remained faithful.

After the birth of Isaac, Sarah can speak of her laughter without guilt or shame, because she knows in spite of her laughter God's promises were kept. She admits, confesses she has laughed, responded poorly to God's promise and yet God has stayed with her, blessed her life. We can confess our human failures, our human doubt, our human inability to trust God's promises because we know that God remains faithful. God says to us "yes you did..." and then continues to hold us in steadfast love.

We see this truth lived out in Jesus. God came to dwell among us in Christ. We heard the promises of God spoken; we saw the promises of God walking in human flesh in Jesus. Yet we could not understand. As disciples we could not hear the promise; we could not see God at work, we denied, betrayed, crucified, doubted... It all seems foolish to us...Why would God live out God's promises in such a way? The disciples hear the promise as Jesus walks towards the cross and almost laugh...yet God remains faithful. As we stand as Easter people, remembering the good news of the resurrection we are able to confess our human failures, our human doubt, our human inability to trust God's promises, our laughter because we know that God remains faithful. We can hear the words "yes you did..." and then continue to know we are held in the steadfast love of God.

Our brokenness is not a threat to our relationship with God. God redeems our brokenness. There is not an expiration date on God's faithfulness. There is no amount of doubt or laughter that can stop God's promises. There is nothing we can do or not do that will change God's promise to love and forgive and call us into new life in Christ over and over again.

God has freed us from needing to earn God's promise. God has freed us from needing to respond correctly to receive God's love. God will remain faithful no matter what.

This frees us to be honest about who we are. This frees us to confess our brokenness, our sin, our failure to live into the fulness of God's promise. This frees us to stop responding "I did not laugh" and rather say "I did... I failed to believe. I failed to trust. I failed to act. I tried it my own way. I made grievous errors" and yet God stays with me, God continues to work in and through me, God is faithful, redeeming the world in spite of me"

And Sarah says "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me".

Sarah's painful laughter is turned to a laugh of joy in the awareness of God's steadfast love for her and in her telling of God's faithfulness, she declares everyone who hears will laugh with me. Everyone is free to confess and to hear the promise of God's faithfulness once again.

I find over the last few weeks in the nation's confronting of racism, many of us are afraid to confess our brokenness, to claim where we have been ignorant or complacent, to consider that we are part of an ingrained system of inequality we don't have eyes to see. We feel threatened

by the idea that we have done wrong even when and if we have tried to live as God intended. We are afraid of being called out “oh yes you did”.

But isn't this the whole reason for Jesus – we must be broken for Jesus to redeem. We do not come to God through our own righteousness. God comes to us and redeems us in Christ.

God's promises free us to confess, free us to claim that we are God's broken people, free us to remember that we need God's redeeming. We stand as Easter people, remembering the good news of the resurrection... we are forgiven and loved, a new creation able to step forward through the work of the Spirit to join God at work redeeming the world God loves.

This is how we enter our worship every Sunday – we begin with the confession and forgiveness and then hear the words of assurance. We hear “yes you did” and then receive the promise anew. We are then sent in this promise to live in and for the world God loves.

We need not imagine being Sarah – for we live as Sarah each day.

God loves you despite your laughter. God loves you in spite of your sin. As Roman's 5: 8 reminds us “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”. Our hope is not found in ourselves, but in our God. Let us not become our own idols but let us confess our brokenness and in doing so confess our need for God.

Then God can turn our laughter from the sound of shame to the sound of joy at our being redeemed and can call us forth in freedom to live a new day that bears the promise of God through our love for our neighbor and the world God loves.