

"When We Laugh"
September 15, 2019
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

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

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. 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.

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?" The LORD said 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? 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. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he 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."

Q: What do you call a fake noodle?

A: An Impasta.

Q: What's the difference between a guitar and a fish?

A: You can't tuna fish.

Q: Did you hear about the race between the lettuce and the tomato?

A: The lettuce was a "head" and the tomato was trying to "ketchup"!

Q: What do lawyers wear to court?

A: Lawsuits!

Q: What did Bacon say to Tomato?

A: Lettuce get together!

Q: How do you make a tissue dance?

A: Put a little boogey in it!

1: It's good to laugh, isn't it?

2: Sarah, from our story in Genesis today, could tell you that! She could also tell you: there are lots of different ways to laugh! There are lots of different kinds of laughter.

SONG: "I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in My Heart"

3: Today we read once again from the book of Genesis.

4: Last week, we read about the creation of the first family, found in Genesis chapter 2. Today, in Genesis 12, we read about another kind of beginning: the creation of the first family of Israel, with Abraham and Sarah as its leaders.

5: Ever since the beginning, God has been promising Sarah and Abraham that God is going to bless their offspring, that they will have descendants as numerous as the stars up in the heavens.

6: There's just one teeny tiny problem with that: it's not happening. And Sarah and Abraham aren't getting any younger. Their future is starting to look pretty sad, pretty empty. The promise for children is starting to look... not so promising.

7: ...Until today. Today, right here in Genesis 18, three strangers appear out of the blue. Sarah and Abraham are simply minding their own business, and these three guys just show up, totally uninvited. But Abraham is a good host, and even though he's never seen these men in his life, he runs around serving them: making sure they get fresh water, bread, curds, and milk.

SONG: "Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant?"

7: As Abraham is continuing to serve these three strange men, filling their water, bringing them more food, one of them casually asks, "Where's Sarah?"

8: "She's there, in the tent," Abraham replies.

7: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son," the stranger says with a smile.

8: Now Sarah overhears all of this. She is hiding in the corner, listening to everything everybody is saying. And when she hears what the strangers say, she nearly falls over backwards: "What did he say?!" Sarah is way too old to have any kids; and even though God made this promise years ago, Sarah has made herself forget it. She has become hardened as the promise has slipped away. So she lets out a laugh, really more like a chortle, "A son? Me? That's ridiculous!" she snorts.

9: Well, God is listening to all this too. God overhears all of this too, and God says to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" And then, maybe something like a little smile appears on God's face, and with shining, tender eyes, God adds: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"

SONG: "Amazing Grace"

10: Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? Sarah has all but given up; she has let go of the promise, and in doing so, she has become hard, scornful, cynical, and pessimistic. Sarah has stopped allowing herself to hope. So she laughs at God, laughs at the promise, laughs at the possibilities.

11: But this doesn't seem to matter to God. Not one bit. God doesn't punish Sarah for her smirking, or for her mocking the promise. Instead, God does exactly what God had always promised: God delivers. God gives Sarah and Abraham a son, even in their very old age. And, months later, after the visit from the three strangers, as Sarah holds the baby in her arms, she whispers: "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah

would nurse children? God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

12: Months after her first cynical, unbelieving laugh, Sarah laughs again. She even names her son after it – Isaac, which in Hebrew means, “laughter.” Sarah laughs again; but this laughter is completely different from her earlier cynicism. This is a laughter filled with awe, and with renewed hope. This is a laughter whose essence is joy.

SONG: “I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in My Heart”

13: When those strangers came to visit Abraham and Sarah, promising a son, Sarah didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Truth be told: she could hardly do either, because she was so dead inside. Her dreams had dried up, and she didn’t want to allow herself to dream again. She’d been let down too much. It had been too painful. Better to hunker down, and to smirk at the world. Better not to let hope get in again, and hurt her even more.

14: But... is anything too wonderful for the LORD?

15: Through the grace of God, Sarah is moved to another kind of laughter, a different kind of laughter. It’s a laughter that opens her up, that startles her to ask, “Could it be...? Could it be that God is really going to come through after all? Could the promise actually it be true?”

16: Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?

SONG: “Amazing Grace”

All: Thanks be to God!