

God Laughs!

King of Glory Lutheran Church
Semi-Continuous reading: Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry
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God's character is seen as a long-awaited promise is fulfilled for Sarah thought to be barren. Humans laugh in God's face at unkept promises and agony and pain. God laughs with us in God (Kairos) moments when God's plan and purposes unfold.

¹The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He 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. ³He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let 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." ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then 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.

⁹They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." ¹⁰Then 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. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." [¹The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." ⁷And 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."]

God's grace and peace to you this holy day as we worship together from far and near. Amen

Today begins a three part sermon series on three stories from the book of Genesis. Genesis sets up themes that are flushed out in the remainder of all our scriptures. In Genesis we have creation of all of nature and humankind. There is sin and the fall. We find the story of God's displeasure with creation and the sending of the flood and Noah's ark. Chapters 12-50 tell of God's first families beginning with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. These folks are flawed, even devious but faithful as well. We see and hear ourselves in the likes of Isaac, Jacob and Esau. It's quite an amazing story!

So let's dig in! Here's a quick play by play up through Genesis 18 to help us locate ourselves in the story. In Genesis 12, God promises to Abram he will have land, descendants and he would be blessed to be a blessing. Through his family, others would be blessed.

But here's the problem. Sarai, Abram's wife is barren. Any couple that has struggled through infertility knows the pain and sorrow and grief that accompanies this journey. Month after month – no results – no pregnancy – no joy. The years continue for Abram and Sarai.

In Genesis 15, God comes again to Abram to renew the promise. God takes him out under a starry sky – like the ones we see up in the high country of Colorado – and God says, "Look up! See all those stars? This is like how many children will come from you and Sarai. Your descendants will be numbered as the stars!" The problem? Sarai's womb is still closed. She has not yet conceived. The couple grows older still.

Finally Sarai gets tired of waiting and gives Abram her own slave girl, Hagar. Hagar conceives and bears a son Ishmael. Finally Abram has a son! God shows up once more and changes Abrams name to Abraham the father of all nations. The promise is restated. "You and Sarai will bear a son." At this Abe laughs and laughs. It's the kind of laugh that bellows up at something so silly and so ridiculous it's just plain funny! Abe says, "Look, God, I've got Ishmael. Isn't that good enough?"

No! The promise has been given and the promise will be kept! God changes Sarai's name to Sarah. "I will bless her and give you a son by her." (17:16)

Thus we come to today's text. The Lord is standing in front of Abraham and re-issues the promise of an heir. This time, it is within Sarah's hearing. "I will surely

return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” Inside the tent, Sarah laughs in disbelief. “Ha! I’m old – so old – that’s impossible.”

Yet the Lord, hears Sarah’s thoughts and questions her doubt. “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’

Of course, Sarah laughed. Who wouldn’t? Who wouldn’t sarcastically laugh at the one who keeps promising but never delivers on the promise. The years have passed. The hope is gone. Why get excited when the promise giver doesn’t keep the promises. Sarah knows she is old: too old for baby bottles and diaper changes.

The point of this passage is about the character of God. I will return to this point. Yet as we reflect upon Sarah’s inner un-hopeful laughter, we hear her disdainful doubt echoed in our brothers and sisters of color. Over the last several weeks, we’ve heard it in their questions and rebukes and challenges to the systems and people who continue to promise and yet never deliver.

Who wouldn’t? Who wouldn’t sarcastically laugh at the ones who keep promising reform but never deliver on that promise? The years have passed. For some the hope is gone. One after one, another child or adult is killed in racial violence. Babies born in hope are buried in the grave. Why get excited when the promise givers don’t keep the promise to listen, to help, to accompany, to understand, to learn, to improve systems which lift up one race and perpetuate the diminishing of others. It just gets old. We’ve made a laughing stock of ourselves.

A few bad cops make a name for the whole. Yet the inequalities in health care and pay and opportunities for God’s children – yet heirs of God’s goodness and God’s promises – still persist. The data is there. There is no denying it. Why wouldn’t they give up hope?

Sarah had given up hope. Her belly laugh came from an empty, broken, barren place. God recognized that. “You laughed!” “Oh, no I didn’t!” “Oh yes, you did. You laughed at me and at the promise. You don’t trust me.”

God’s next question becomes the crux of the matter. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Is anything impossible for the Lord? Is there anything that God cannot do? Is God yet a trustworthy God when the yearly calendars come and go and promises are not received?

Yes. God is trustworthy. God fulfills God's promises. Believe it or not, God can act outside of our belief or unbelief! God's actions are not dependent upon our trust or hope in God. God acts within God's will and within God's promises.

Well, if God can do anything than why don't we get everything we ask for? Heaven knows we've all asked for something we believe is impossible for God, and yet we've still persisted in asking.

The fact that God acts outside our trust doesn't mean we receive everything we ask for. God is not a candy or pop machine where we put in our coins and out comes our favorite flavor.

No, it's not like that. God lives within covenantal relationship with God's people. A covenant that states, "I will be your God and you will be my people." God's purposes are higher than we understand. Not our every desired thing is possible. Not our every desire is promised.

What is possible with God depends upon God's promises. God has promised to Abraham and Sarah a future of land, descendants and blessings coming from their family line. That is what is promised. From that promise, God delivers.

Thus nine months later, the punch bowl is full, Isaac is in the basinet and baby gifts are at Sarah's lap with women gathered around. Now hear her say, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." At this moment, Sarah recognizes God's fulfillment of the promise in spite of her doubt.

Abraham laughed in silliness. Sarah laughed in doubt. God told the couple to name the child Isaac, which means "he laughs." The baby is named laughter! God gets the last loving laugh to see the old man and his old wife holding the long-awaited promise. They'd given up hope, but God had not. God had promised.

The character of God – the loving, purposeful, faithful actions of God – do not rest upon our timelines and our objectives. Within God's character, God will be faithful to God's promises for God's children. The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story of two parties, human and divine, walking together, waiting together and living into God's covenant for their very best future. It's not easy. It takes time. But God's plans and promises are sure. Then God laughs with our joy. God gets the best and last laugh.

It's always dangerous to take a text and make it say something it's not saying.

Yet when I see white police officers walking arm in arm and kneeling, knee by knee right next to our siblings of other skin colors, I see the fulfillment of God's promises. Not every desire will be possible. Not everything possible will be fulfilled. But any step forward to a future of hope and increased possibilities – for all of God's children - is of God!

God's character embodied incarnate in Jesus Christ, offered the same love, the same hope, the same forgiveness to all of God's heirs. Jesus made God the Father's love known, to Jews, to non-believing Gentiles, to slaves and to the free, to rich and the poor. Jesus proclaimed in no uncertain terms God's promises of a future with new hope. The promise wasn't land and descendants. It was a promise that they weren't forgotten. God was with them. God heard their prayers and their oppression under Roman rule had not gone unnoticed.

Perhaps – we are in the same Kairos days – the fulfilling of God's promises days – when God is renewing a promise for all of God's children. Oppression is not justified. Justice will come. Reconciliation will come. Equality will come. When every knee will bow and every tongue confess the love of God for all people. Just being “Ishmael” – a son of the slave woman – isn't good enough. Being an heir means being a full blown member of the household.

I think God loves to laugh. When our tears become hugs, God must laugh. When our denial becomes repentance, God laughs. When our shouts of injustice turn to prayers of forgiveness, God laughs. When our mourning becomes dancing in the resurrection, God laughs.

May all that is possible in God's good purposes come to birth now. May we laugh trusting in God's promises....because God created all of us to laugh within God and with God. Amen!