

"Is it Laughable to Hope for the Impossible?"

Genesis 18: 1-15

July 17, 2022

York Center Church of the Brethren

Daniel Poole preaching

And she laughed!

I don't know, I wonder if that wouldn't have been my reaction too. After all, she's just been told that she is going to bear a son to fulfill the new covenant promised by God to be forged through Abraham. But she knows that her child-bearing years are far in the rear-view mirror for her. Or as the text puts it so matter-of-factly, "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." Which is a very artistic way of saying that she had entered menopause and so the idea of being able to conceive a child seemed really far-fetched. Not to mention that she had been unable to bear children during her once reproductive years - carrying the heavy burden of barrenness that haunted her all these years. And now, she's being informed by God that all that will change, and she will bear a son to her very geriatric husband. I don't know what you think, it seems that her laughter was a justified response.

Are you a movie fan? I do like to watch movies - or rather earlier in life I enjoyed them more than I do the ones made today. But that probably just means I'm getting old. But one of my favorites from the last generation was a film called Princess Bride. I enjoy that movie a lot - it is clever and a well written story with some wonderful acting. And if you hang out with me long enough, you will learn that I like to quote lines from certain movies that have made an impression on me - and Princess Bride is one of those films. There is one artful play on words used throughout the first part of the film communicated through the character known as Vizzini - played masterfully by Wallace Shawn.

But in case you are unfamiliar with it, "The Princess Bride" is a child's fairytale about a beautiful princess who falls in love with a handsome young man but before they can get married the beautiful princess is kidnapped by a scheming, bald little man and his two friends, the slow but good-hearted giant and the Spanish sword fighter, Inigo Montoya.

And while these kidnappers are trying to get away from the pursuing Wesley, the bald little man keeps uttering this one word, "Inconceivable!" every time that Wesley evades the most recent trap and continues his pursuit.

And every time he says it we laugh, why? Because every time he thinks something is "absolutely, totally, and in every other way completely inconceivable" it actually happens. {96}

But when God makes a promise to Sarah and Sarah says (if you'll pardon a terrible pun), "Inconceivable" we don't laugh. Why not? Because she was right

But the laughter. Have you ever wondered about how that sounded? Now, I checked with Dr. Steve Schweitzer our academic dean and a Hebrew scholar as I was preparing this sermon. I asked about laughter and its meaning in the Hebrew because I was curious because in English the word laughter has many different connotations. Sadly, he said, there is little nuance in the Hebrew - laughter is laughter. However, since we are translating from the Hebrew there is always space for interpretation because it is never cut and dried. So, I wanted us to think about laughter for a minute.

There is the kind of laughter that emerges as a deep belly shaking when we are struck by something truly hilarious. That kind of laughter has a certain tone to it and carries a certain inference - and is unmistakable. It reminds me of a woman in the congregation that I served in Ohio - Pauline - who had this big, gregarious laugh. Her laughter (some even called it a cackle) was so infectious and filled the room so completely and you couldn't help but find yourself laughing along with her. Her ability to laugh was quite remarkable because she had much to be melancholy about - having lived long enough to have witnessed the death of 5 of her 6 children. It was a deep pain that she bore - but it did not stifle her deep joy for life which she transmitted through her easy laugh. Perhaps it was her ability to laugh so freely that allowed her to continue to find joy in life despite all the hardship.

When I think of laughter, I also think about the kind of sarcastic snoot that we make when we hear something that we disagree with, or which strikes a chord of displeasure with something. It is usually brief, sort of cut off and has a very different tone to it. It is the kind of laughter that I must be careful not to utilize too freely as it can be painful for others to receive and can even be used to hurt others if we are not careful.

Then there is the laughter that sometimes emerges to mask our discomfort - sometimes called nervous laughter. Perhaps you have noticed someone who does this. It is often thought of as a very fake kind of laughter. It is the anxious response of some who seek to relieve the stress through this kind of laughter, but funny enough it can actually make the stress more intense because others perceive the anxiety and can grow uncomfortable as a result of that person's discomfort.

Well, I'm sure there are many other forms of laughter - and I'm sure the internet can educate you all. That wasn't my point. But, with the differing connotations for laughter in our society, it just caused me to wonder about what it meant for Sarah to laugh in this moment. I don't think Sarah laughed a deep belly laugh - although that could be possible if she was honestly struck on her funny bone by the idea that too centenarians could have a baby. It could have been a sarcastic retort - I can see that. It most likely was that kind of response of disbelief - whether that was sarcasm or just plain amusement at the thought.

Well, before I get too far down the "what kind of laughter was it" path, let's step back a minute because we need to gain some greater perspective for the context of this particular piece of the story which is our focus today. You know, I'm not a biblical scholar - but I have the privilege of working with two of the best, my colleagues on faculty at Bethany - Steve Schweitzer in Hebrew Bible and Dan Ulrich in New Testament. And one of the things that I have learned from them over the years is that while it is enormously helpful to have the Bible broken into chapters and verses for cataloging purposes - it helps us in our study and in our ability to locate passages - and that's good. But one of the drawbacks of having the Bible neatly segmented into digestible chunks is that it tends to make one forget to step back and see the larger narrative - to realize that each little story is nestled into a much larger story, and it is arranged in a particular way to tell a particular story - that is all intentional. But, when we artificially tune in our focus on just one of this little sub-story segments and forget to connect it back to the overall narrative arc, then we inadvertently miss some important details which give context to these individual pieces.

So, for instance, it is really important for us to understand our scripture for today from the first half of chapter 18 of *Genesis* within the larger narrative arc in which it is nestled, and which gives greater meaning to its particularity. This part of the story is just one segment in the ongoing narrative of the saga about Abraham and Sarah, which is just a smaller part of the big narrative of God's interaction with humanity.

So, the outline provided by Hebrew Bible scholar and former Bethany president, Gene Roop, in his commentary on *Genesis*, provides a very helpful large overview of the entirety of *Genesis*. In this outline we learn that chapters 11 - 25 entail what Roop calls the "Saga of Abraham and Sarah." So, there are several chapters dedicated to telling the story of God's promise of a new covenant provided through Abraham's line of heirs. Chapter 18, then, is just one small piece and we must realize that it fits within a subsection of chapters 16 - 21 which

details "The Story about an Heir," as Roop names it. Our pericope for today - the first half of chapter 18 - more specifically falls within the section about the "Annunciation of Isaac," - which we come to learn is finally how God is able to make this promise of an heir finally come to fruition by providing the conception and birth of a son to these parents who had long given up hope for such a thing but who had continued to demonstrate their faith in God through those years nonetheless.

When we consider the larger narrative at work here, we realize that what we have in chapter 18 - the promise of a male heir - is not the first time God is making such an announcement to this aged couple nor is it the first time that someone laughs in response. When we rewind to chapter 16, the story of the heir, we remember that Abram and Sarai try to reach for God's promise by conceiving a child through Sarai's servant girl, Hagar. We know that Hagar does indeed conceive and bear a son - who is named Ishmael. For whatever reason, however, we are told that God's promise is not carried through Ishmael. So, in chapter 17, God again visits with Abram - and to emphasize this new covenant - Yahweh bestows upon him a new name - Abraham. In this part of the story we learn that Abraham is the first to laugh at God's pronouncement. But God is unfazed by this reaction - and lays out the promise and listens to Abraham's plea to bless Ishmael, even though God declares that the full blessing will not come through him but will come through Isaac who is yet to be born.

This leads us to chapter 18, where the promise of a new covenant is reiterated. So, chapter 18 is kind of interesting in this respect. Do you wonder what this means - that God comes to declare the promise again - this time in somewhat more cloaked form? Many scholars have puzzled over this encounter. Is it a reaffirmation of the promise made before? Does this encounter, because Yahweh appears rather secretly through the visit of the three strangers out in the wilderness - serve as a final testing of the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah? In fact, since hospitality plays a central role in this visit, some scholars have even explained that Abraham's reception of the strangers is linked to whether or not they are deserving of being blessed with offspring. Again, Dean Steve Schweitzer informed me that the expression of generous hospitality was one of the ancient world's methods for judging a person's character - those who failed to demonstrate kindness and hospitality were considered lacking in good moral character, with the implication being they are therefore not fit to be parents. So, in some ways, this might have been part of what is going on here with God's secondary visit. Either way, Abraham even though it's clear from the text that he doesn't realize right away that he is visiting with Yahweh, he seems to have some sort of sense or insight into the special nature of these visitors. That becomes

clear in the fact that he offers hospitality that is over and above the standard level. He demands the finest flour for the bread and the prized fattened calf for three visitors, as well as the cool refreshing water to soothe and clean the feet of the weary travelers. And when the story finally turns to why the travelers have shown up at their tent, we realize they have made this journey to once again proclaim the promise from God for Abraham and Sarah - and for his legacy for the people of Israel.

Now, upon hearing that at their advanced age they are going to be blessed with a child, it is Sarah's turn to laugh. We are back to my original point - I wonder what kind of laugh it was. When we look at the Hebrew word used here *tsachaq* (*tsaw-khak*) in this instance - it is the only instance of this particular Hebrew word use. While that doesn't always necessarily mean something significant, often it causes us to pay closer attention because of the unique nature of the word use. According to the various translations, we get a sense that Sarah's laugh might not have been outwardly audible - or heard by the visitors. The implication is that upon overhearing the sharing of the visitors with her husband, she laughs to herself. Other translations phrase it as laughing inwardly. Of course, we know from the story, since Abraham is conversing with Yahweh, Sarah's laugh to herself is indeed overheard - because it is Yahweh who is listening. More on that in a minute.

According to Strong's Concordance, the Hebrew word used here has an interesting connotation to it - suggesting the root word means to laugh in merriment or scorn, and by implication to sport - laugh, mock, play, to make sport of the moment. So, the implication of the use of this word to describe Sarah's laugh, at the very least would suggest Sarah having difficulty accepting the possibility of this promise. I think would be hard to blame her for this reaction. One could also suggest that through her laugh Sarah is outright mocking the possibility of the promise - a much stronger interpretation of her reaction. There is no real way for us to know, of course.

It is interesting - it is likely just a normal response that one might make upon hearing news that seems far-fetched and, dare we say it - inconceivable. A word which takes on an almost cruel double meaning in this story - the news and the promise which certainly feels is inconceivable to Sarah that God could actually break the cycle of barrenness which she has tolerated her entire life - to overturn her inconceivable womb.

But, interestingly enough, that is what we are left with these kind of faith stories which invite us to consider the impossible - which invite us to imagine, with God's intervention - what might indeed come to fruition. We are invited to step

into Abrahams shoes and consider what a promise from God entails - a promise to be made real through our very own life - and through extraordinary means no less - perhaps a path that seems unbelievable or even inconceivable.

We are invited to sit down alongside Sarah and imagine what it must feel like to have borne the frustration for one's entire life to not have been able to conceive a child and give birth to an heir and to experience the joys and frustrations of raising children - and to imagine how it must have felt when God wanders along out in the wilderness and seemingly dangles before her imagination this one improbable thing which she has likely longed for her whole life. It must certainly feel far-fetched and a pipe dream. I don't struggle to understand her initial reaction of disbelief and even sarcasm at the uttering of the promise. It all seems too difficult to imagine - perhaps even too dangerous to allow a sliver of hope to enter her heart and entertain the possibility that this could in fact be true - to only have that hope, that promise obliterated once again by the reality of her own womb which knows only too well. And, really, I think that is why Yahweh is disappointed in Sarah's laugh - because it represents her unwillingness to embrace the possibility of the promise - it represents her inability to accept that God can indeed do this thing. I know that God is not displeased with Abraham or Sarah because what is being asked of them is enormous and I believe God understands the size of the ask - but I think the displeasure comes because it represents a lack of trust in Yahweh - in God's self - not just in God's words.

But those are the stakes of a God-sized promise. We are called to embrace the imagination necessary to boldly step into what God promises for us. We are called to believe the seemingly unbelievable. This is the very definition of a faithful response. We may not be able to see all of the steps that lie ahead - but to accept the promise means that we willingly take the next step in the direction of faithfulness because we trust that God will make true on the promise if we are courageous enough to do our part. The take home for us today - the Good News of this hard story of promise - is that the author of Genesis is trying to convince us to remain faithful - even when all else seems too impossible to believe or even when the odds seem overwhelming and even when things feel inconceivable. Again, Gene Roop in his Genesis commentary puts it so well, saying, "it's not that Yahweh will do all things (as is so often said) but that God's promises will not fail." That is an important distinction.