

Betsey Moe
Sermon 10.25.09
“To Laugh at Hope”

Psalm 113

1Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord; praise the name of the Lord.
2Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time on and forevermore.
3From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.
4The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.
5Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high,
6who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?
7He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
8to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.
9He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!

Genesis 18:1-15

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. 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.”

For the first four years of our marriage, Eric and I lived in apartments, and then in a small house in the Phoenix area, and I do not remember having much contact with children in either place. I’m sure there were kids around, but neighbor kids were not a part of our lives. Then we moved to New Jersey to the married student housing complex at seminary, which was brimming with kids. It was quite a change, but to tell you the truth, we had no idea what we had been missing.

The children in our building were always saying the funniest things; we always had something to laugh about. To get to our car in the back parking lot, we came out the shared front door of the apartment and walked past the ground-floor deck of one family. Eric and I walked out to our car on a windy fall day, and their five-year-old girl was on the deck. She looked straight at us and said, “Where are your coats?” One day, we walked past the deck and their three-year-old boy was pedaling his bike but getting nowhere because the body of the bike was suspended off the ground so that the wheels were just spinning. “Whatcha doin’?” we asked him. With a straight face, he said, “Exercising.” My mom has always said that her favorite thing about having children was how much laughter we brought to the house. It has been true in our family; I have to tell you something my own son Henry said just last night: I was cleaning the playroom with the kids, and I said, “Are you guys ready to get rid of this Fisher-Price farm set? It’s kind of young for you.” Henry said, “No, I think we should store it – in case we have another baby someday...you know, like Abraham and Sarah.” I think he knows at this point how to get me.

This morning, we can laugh thinking of the children in our midst, but Sarah’s laughter in today’s story is of a different kind. Sarah laughs, not with delight, but with a hint of sarcasm at the thought of a baby being born from her 90-year-old body. She laughs not out of joy but out of disbelief – and we know this because she tried to cover it up. Hers was a laughter borne out of a lifetime of hopelessness. It was a laughter that says, “You gotta be kidding me. Ha! There’s no way.” And she is not the only one. In the scene right before this one, Abraham laughs at the news; in fact, Abraham falls on his face and laughs. You get the impression that both Abraham and Sarah see this news as some sort of sick joke.

You can’t blame them. Here’s a couple in a culture in which having a child was everything. A son would bring security to Abraham and Sarah as they aged. A son would carry on their family name and traditions and values. A son would bring pleasure, to use Sarah’s words. But the fertile years went by for Sarah – she found herself at thirty years old, then forty years old, no child. Fifty years old, sixty years old, no child. When Sarah was 65 and Abraham 75, God promised Abraham he would have a son who would be the father of an entire nation. Abraham and Sarah could have laughed at this point, but they held it. Could it be that God would make that possible? But then after another 25 years went by, and there was still no son. At this point, Abraham and Sarah were, as one commentator writes, “resigned to their closed future.” They were accepting of the fact that some dreams just don’t come true, that sometimes God’s promises just don’t work out. We know because of last week’s story about Hagar and Ishmael being roped into the plan that Abraham and Sarah felt so hopeless, so closed to the possibility of their own son, that they hatch a plan to use another woman’s womb. The fact is that by the time they are visited by the Lord in Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah had given up all hope. When the question was posed by God, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” their answer would have been, “Yeah. Maybe some things.”

This rut of resignation feels familiar. Even though we don’t intend to, we in the church get stuck in ruts of “the way it is” and cannot imagine God doing new, significant work through us. The people of God in every place – and our church is not immune to this -- tend to resign themselves to a closed future.

Here’s what it may look like:

You're at a community meeting, or a church meeting, for that matter, and someone brings up the idea of developing or supporting a new ministry in Spokane. You think, "with the economy the way it is? Ha! That's a laugh. There's no way!"

You're in a Bible Study, and the idea comes up that we as Christians should be drawing in and ministering to the unchurched in our neighborhood. You think, "The unchurched? Interested in a Presbyterian Church? Ha!"

Let's say you serve at a downtown shelter and you have this fleeting thought that you're not making a lasting difference, and wouldn't it be something if you and the church could make a significant change in the lives of the poor in this city so that not as many people were on the street in the first place. But then you think, "Ha! I wouldn't even know where to start."

You see, on good days, we may think, "Well, maybe the church could make a difference. Maybe if *everyone* pooled their resources of time and talents and money, God could do something through us." But on bad days, which we all have, we fall back into the resignation. "It will never work, we've tried such-and-such before, this *is* the Presbyterian Church, after all, with slow-working committees and people stuck in their ways. How easy it is to remember that the church is old and barren. We answer the question, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" with, "Well, yeah, maybe some things."

The good news for Abraham and Sarah is that their laughter, unbelieving or sarcastic as it may be, does not hold back the power of God. Their hopeless resignation does not make God withhold God's fulfilled promise. Some people read the last line of today's text as a sharp reprimand: "Oh yes, you DID laugh." But there is no indication that the Lord got angry. In fact, it was important that Sarah own up to her own laughter and disbelief so that when the baby came, she would remember that he only came because of God's faithfulness, not hers or Abraham's. The gospel is that Abraham and Sarah cannot thwart the promises of God; the child came despite their resistance and their hopelessness.

This story in Genesis 18 was remembered and recorded because it was descriptive of Israel at so many stages of their life as a nation. This is not a story about how God deals with literal infertility. It is a story about how God always makes a way when Israel resigns themselves to a closed future. This story describes the scene at the Red Sea, when these newly freed slaves saw a threatening body of water in front of them and a raging army behind them. They laughed in the face of all hope – until God made a way through the water. The Abraham and Sarah story describes the emotional state of Israel when they were scattered into exile and everything they held dear and considered holy was mocked and destroyed. They resigned themselves to destruction as a people – yet God made a way, bringing hope through the prophets. The Abraham and Sarah story describes the disciples in the New Testament, when they watched their leader suffer and die on a cross. They were ready to run away and consider the last three years of their lives a waste – until God made a way, raising Jesus from the dead. The Abraham and Sarah story is one of the greatest testimonies of hope recorded in scripture because it shows that our self-concept of barrenness, our lack of faith, cannot finally thwart the promises of God.

When Eric and I lived in Arizona, I went to a conference at the Historic First Presbyterian Church in downtown Phoenix. The story of what they were doing as a church at that time stuck with me. This was a huge church that, like so many churches in our country, enjoyed an explosion of membership in the 1950's and had built numerous additions accordingly. By the end of the 1990's, long after most people had moved out of the city and into the suburbs, they had become a somewhat small worshipping community in their huge building, which was now surrounded by substandard housing and gang activity. But a group of people from that church who were most likely laughed at or fretted over by other well-meaning church members, went out into the neighborhood, knocked on doors, and asked their neighbors how they could be of help. They found out that there were a lot of families living nearby, and what these families really needed was someplace for their kids to go after school between the hours of 3 and 8 p.m. Well, Historic First Presbyterian had a gym, they had floors of empty classrooms, so they created a program called "DUCK" – Downtown Urban Community Kids. People from their church and from the city could volunteer as tutors, coaches, art instructors, mentors. Three years before I heard this story, most of the people at that church would have laughed and asked, "What can an old, barren church like ours do for the city of Phoenix?" But in due season, they saw with their own eyes what God was able to do through them, despite their disbelief. In due season, they were laughing along with the busloads of children that poured into their church every day.

We don't know what exactly God has planned for our congregation, for the church in Spokane – but if these plans are anything like God's plans for the world in scripture, they're going to be about spreading the message of forgiveness and hope in Christ in ways that bring transformation. They're going to be about changing the way we live – feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, bringing justice to the poor. In other words, God's plans will be too much, too wonderful, for us to do. If, in your daydreams, you overhear one of these plans of God, I say go ahead and laugh – any kind of laugh is an acknowledgement that you've heard one of God's outlandish promises. Soon, as God fulfills God's promises despite your disbelief, you'll be laughing like you do in the hope-filled presence of children.