

“Sarah Laughed”

One of my most embarrassing moments in life happened in church of all places. It happened on a Sunday morning. Following Sunday School some of us would sit together in the first or second pew of the church worship. This particular Sunday it was just my friend David and me. I do not know what got into David, but he decided that it would be fun to tell me jokes during the sermon. There we sat just to the preacher’s left and the front. David would wait until the preacher was looking away and whisper a joke in my ear. I could not restrain myself from laughing. Of course, as soon as I started laughing the preacher would stare our way. I would be doing my best to cover up the laughter, while David sat very prim and proper. I do not know what the rest of the congregation felt. I did not dare look around. But I know that the preacher was not happy with me. My laughter like Sarah’s in today’s reading from Genesis was not appreciated. While laughter is the linchpin to the Genesis reading, before we go there let’s discuss what leads up to the laughter.

As you remember from last week, Abraham and Sarah (who were then Abram and Sarai before God changed their names¹) are called by God to pack up and move from their home in Haran to the land of Canaan. God does not give Abraham a specific location to move to. God just directs Abraham to pack up all of his possessions, gather his livestock, and call together all of his household and go. We get an abbreviated travelogue as Abram and party stop in various places where he builds altars to God. His journey continues on to the Negeb which is in the south.

Today we meet them much later in their journey. It is six chapters later and since what we heard last week. They have had many adventures in the meantime. They went down to Egypt, then back to the Negeb. After splitting up with his nephew Lot he fought a war where he rescued Lot from captivity and obtained much booty. He gave the best ten percent of the booty to the priest Melchizedek as an offering to God (which is the basis for the tithe). God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah that they will have descendants as numerous as the stars. He has a son, Ishmael, by Sarah’s slave Hagar. But this is not the son of the covenant because that son is to be born of Sarah.

In today’s reading we catch up with Abraham, Sarah and company camped out near the Oaks of Mamre. As he sits in the encampment Abraham spies three individuals coming his way and runs to greet them. He begs them to come sit with him and have a refreshing drink and a morsel of food. It is important to be hospitable to others in the desert for the desert is a treacherous place. You never know when you might be a traveler and need hospitality. So he welcomes the travelers and gives them much more than a little refreshment. He gives them a feast.

It is important to note that Abraham does not know who these three people are. We know through the narrator that the leader of the group is the LORD, that is that the leader is YHWH. For the LORD is used to convey the proper name of God YHWH, which is too sacred to say. We know that Abraham does not know it is YHWH because he addresses this traveler as “My lord” not capitalized which means the word behind it is not YHWH but *adonai* a generic Hebrew word of respect.

As the travelers and Abraham are feasting and talking YHWH indicates that in the next year Sarah will have a son. At this point Abraham is one-hundred-years-old

¹ Abram means “exalted father” Abraham means “father of many nations.” Sarai means “princess” but when God changes her name to Sarah God gives it the meaning of “mother of many nations.”

and Sarah is about ninety-years-old. The scripture tells us that “it had ceased to be for Sarah after the manner of women.” That is, she is long past menopause. Sarah who is still in the tent hears the discussion and laughs to herself. Her laughter is derisive and not at all humorous. The idea that in her advanced years she should be able to bear a child is ridiculous to her. It is also ridiculous to us for we know women do not have children when they are in their 90s. But YHWH hearing Sarah laugh assures her that she indeed will have a child, and asks of her, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”²

A year later Sarah does indeed bear a son. Abraham decides to name the boy Isaac or in Hebrew יִצְחָק (*Yitzhak*) which means “he will laugh.” What a beautiful name and what a way to remind themselves and us that their laughter, for Abraham had laughed at God’s promise of many descendants earlier in Genesis, and disbelief had been turned into laughter of joy when what they thought was an absurd promise was fulfilled.

We get so serious and pious when we read and study scripture that we forget that laughter is one of God’s gifts. We can laugh in disbelief or derision as Abraham and Sarah did. We can also laugh at a joke at appropriate and inappropriate times, we can laugh in delight and we can laugh in joy. We can share that laughter and joy with others.

In Psalm 30 the writer says “thou hast turned my laments into dancing. You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy”³ The psalmist does not deny that there has been darkness and trials worthy of lamentation. What he says is that God has taken that darkness and turned it into light. Earlier in Psalm 30 he reminds us that “weeping may linger for the night but joy comes with the morning.”⁴ Even when we are living through the darkest of times we are assured that light will return.

We who trust in the Lord know that laughter will come again. That joy will come again. We know we will encounter sadness and despair but it is not for ever. For we who are made in the image of God are also given access to gifts from God—joy, laughter, hope, peace, community and love. In the end, we are given everlasting life with God who wipes away every tear.⁵

Laugh when you will. Laugh often. Be like a little child and laugh at your laughter. Be like a child and just laugh. We adults get too serious and for too long. Let your inner Isaac come out. Let God turn your laments into dancing. As we say in Evening Prayer “You are worthy at all times to be praised with happy voices.” Praise God with joy. Laugh and let your life be filled with God. Let it tickle you and everyone you meet. Let everyone call you *Yitzhak*, the one who laughs.

² Genesis 18:14

³ Psalm 30:11

⁴ Psalm 30:5b

⁵ Revelation 21:4