

When Faith is a Laughing Matter Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

I can't do better than to share Frederick Buechner's description of our lesson this morning: "The place to start is with a woman laughing. She is an old woman, and after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and rutted like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts to shake.

She squinches her eyes shut, and her laughter is all teeth and wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing 91 hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby.

Even though it was an angel who told her, she can't control herself, and her husband can't control himself, either. He keeps a straight face a few seconds longer than she does, but he ends up cracking up, too.

Even the angel is not unaffected. He hides his mouth behind his golden scapular, but you can still see his eyes. They are larkspur blue and brimming with something of which the laughter of the old woman and her husband is at best only a rough translation.

The old woman's name is Sarah, of course, and the old man's name is Abraham, and they are laughing at the idea of a baby being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare picking up the tab.

They are laughing because the angel not only seems to believe it, but seems to expect them to believe it, too. They are laughing because with part of themselves they do believe it. They are laughing because with another part of themselves they know it would take a fool to believe it. They are laughing because laughing is better than crying, and maybe not even all that different.

They are laughing because if by some crazy chance it should just happen to come true, then they would really have something to laugh about. They are laughing at God and with God, and they are laughing at themselves too, because laughter has that in common with weeping. No matter what the immediate occasion is of either your laughter or your tears, the object of both ends up being yourself and your own life.ⁱ

It's preposterous, impossible, silly, foolish, outrageous, laughable. And, of course, so was the original invitation. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called...and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land.

By faith, Sarah herself received the power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered God faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:8-11)

Faith always contains an element of the unknown, the unexpected, the unpredictable, the impossible, the outrageous, the laughable. Otherwise, it wouldn't be faith.

We today don't always understand the concept of "barrenness" in the Bible. By the standards of that day, there was nothing worse than the lack of children. No children meant no future, no hope. With no clear concept of heaven or eternal life, the only way one's life was extended beyond the moment was through their progeny, their heirs, their children.

Without children, when you died you were just dead—zip, gone, kaput, over, done. Without children your legacy meant there was no future, no hope, and no promise.

Today, however, we have an eternal God who promises to be with his people, to journey with his people, to lead his people and give them a hope and a future. It is the word of the Risen Christ who comes to be with us in the midst of our doubt and defeat and darkness, and even through death to offer his people the promise of resurrection and new birth.

Peter writes: You have been born anew to a living hope. (I Peter 1:3) Paul writes to the Colossians: The secret is simply this: Christ is in you, bringing with him the hope of glorious things to come. (Col. 1:27) And to the Romans: Rejoice in hope; be patient in tribulation. (Rom. 12:12)

A time like this is not the time for the church to muffle its message or weaken its voice, for we have a Savior who walks with us through every dark valley. Who, in the words of the Psalmist, can “turn our mourning into dancing and our tears into shouts of joy.”

Maybe Abraham and Sarah got it right. **Maybe faith really is a laughing matter.** Maybe faith carries in its bones the echo of joy that rings in the dark places and the barrenness of life, bringing hope and new life.

I mean, that’s what I see in this passage. I see Sarah laughing in disbelief: “No way! You’ve gotta be kidding! We’re gonna have a what?” It’s clear that Sarah laughed and Abraham laughed because they simply didn’t believe it.

It happens all the time in the Bible – finding it hard to believe God’s promises. Those in Nazareth would never believe that a carpenter’s son would become the world’s savior. That Jesus, let alone Peter, could walk on water or feed five thousand people with five loaves and three fishes?

It’s impossible. It’s ridiculous. It’s laughable. It’s the laughter of disbelief, and we’ve all laughed it from time to time, haven’t we?

But look again at the passage. The laughter of disbelief soon turns to the laughter of faith assured and promises fulfilled.

Now Sarah and Abraham realize that the angel believes, and they begin to believe....and sure enough, God keeps his promise, and a child is born.

Again, turning to Frederick Buechner: “It starts with a catch of the breath because the last thing either of them expected to do was to laugh, and it takes them by surprise as much as it takes us by surprise. It wells up in their throats like sorrow, only it’s not sorrow, and it contorts their faces like tears, only it’s a different kind of tears.

Their shoulders shake. Their faces go red. Their China teeth slip a notch. Sarah stuffs her apron in her mouth and Abraham gasps for air.ⁱⁱ And they laugh the laughter of eternity, of disbelief turned to faith, of death overcome by resurrection and new life, of a promised future and hope.

Oh, sure enough, the **darkness still exists, but it’s shot through with light.** Sure enough, pain still exists, but in the midst of pain, there is healing. Sure enough, fear still assaults us, but we confront it with the calm assurance of God’s final victory.

Sure enough, death still confronts us—the final battle, the last enemy, and by all accounts, unless Christ returns, none of us are going to get out of this life alive—but on the other side there is the promise of resurrection and the eternal laughter of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Tears of barrenness are turned to the tears of joyful song. Tears of uncertainty are turned into the laughter of the ages. The Psalmist says: "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

Well, the story ends with Sarah's final word of witness: "God has brought me joy and laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me." And as a fitting final touch, the Genesis writer says they named their son Isaac, meaning "God laughs" —which is at least to say that God giggles, God smiles, God slaps his thigh, God shares the joy, and God himself laughed all the way to the delivery room.

Listen. Can you hear it? The laughter heard from the very moment of creation? The laughter from the first movement of the Spirit over the waters of the deep, from the first burst of light, from the first baby's cry and God's word that it is all good.

Listen - for the sounds of joy which overcome the shouts of fear; for the echoes of hope heard even in the face of discouragement and doubt and despair; for the laughter of the Savior ringing out from an empty tomb.

Listen.

Faith really is a laughing matter, after all. Take time to laugh.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Telling Truth*, page 49

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, page 52