

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, JUNE 14, 2020

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Ha! He-He! Agh! Huh?"

Based on Genesis 21:1-7

Sarah laughed! Sarah laughed with a wonder and bewilderment that was filled with the emotion of a woman, who for just a moment, was able to throw off years of sadness, feelings of unworthiness, and believe that the One responsible for the spinning of the great cosmos had not forgotten her. In these precious moments:

- Life was restored and born again.
- Her purpose was fulfilled; a son!
- Her place among the women restored.
- And so she laughed.

When the commotion had died down, the boy presented to his father, Abraham, and celebrations were in full swing in the main tent, Sarah recalled a strange event about a year previously. She had laughed then, too. But it had been a laugh of bitterness.

Three strangers had arrived out of the desert sun late one afternoon. Abraham was overjoyed at the prospect of guests, and news from further afield. He called for food, and wine, and a comfortable place for the guests to sleep, chiding Sarah when she complained

about all the extra work involved. Abraham spouted off something about, "Attending angels unawares" and hurried a servant along to look for comfortable slippers for the guests. Sarah listened to the conversation over the evening, as she slipped in and out of the tent serving the men. Abraham spoke humbly of his success and fame as a shepherd and landowner; and eloquently of his beliefs in an unseen God, so powerful and life changing that one dare not even say His name fully. "It was this same God," Abraham told his guests, "that was responsible for his wealth, and his success."

"Ah, Abraham and his God," Sarah grimaced to herself. "He's always talking about his God, and offering praise and sacrifices; saying how blessed he is." "How blessed am I in all this?" Sarah contemplated. "An old woman, with nothing to show for it. Barren. Laughed at by the other women of the tents. Unable to give the one thing to a husband that women were valued for: sons. Her only mark upon this earth, to be named as the 'first wife'."

The bitterness crept up raw in her throat, as she went back to the tent one last time before leaving the men to their pipes and the fire. As she had leaned in to open the flap of the tent,

she had heard the most extraordinary proclamation from one of the visitors: "Sarah would bear a child in the coming year." Sarah had laughed then too. It was not a happy laugh, but almost a guffaw that spoke volumes of the dismay, and disappointment, and the unwillingness to get her hopes up; at the mere absurdity of suggesting to an old man, that the beloved son he pined for would be a reality. It was all too painful to take in. And so Sarah laughed.

Yet, about a year later, Sarah laughed again as a small child was swaddled and laid next to her. How improbable, but not impossible. God had been faithful. Abraham had been right. They had indeed attended angels that night in the desert. And for just a short window of time, there was an intense clarity between Sarah and God; a time when all the struggles and emotions and disappointments in life were pushed aside and God was very present in the moment.

"God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." (v6)

My friends, Sarah's story is not the neat and tidy story of faith that we have somehow imagined our faith journey's to

be. Her laughter did not linger long. The world caved back in for Sarah. While Abraham seemed to convey an unshakeable trust in his God from the very beginning, Sarah's story is much different: disappointment, duty, dismay. Sarah laughed, but it was often caustic or cynical in its tone, almost hysterical, at some points. As Abraham's wife, she was the most highly ranked woman for her time and place in history. But...

- She doubted this God that her husband spoke of with such reverence.
- She resented the other women and the ease with which they bore children.
- She was bitterly jealous of anyone who had anything that she believed she did not have.
- Yet she remains the 'mother of all the nations.' Without Sarah, there is no story. There is no story of Christ without the story of Sarah.

Many generations after Sarah, Paul would say that love *"Always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."* (1 Cor 13: 7).

But saying it, and believing it, are not always the same. It is a wonderful thing if you can look upon the resolve and immense trust that Abraham had for YHWH and

- Never falter,
- Never doubt,

- Never wonder 'what if'?
But I suspect that quietly, some of us, faithful disciples as we are, feel more like a Sarah than an Abraham.

"**Lord**, what are you doing? I keep praying for you to show me a direction and I get nothing! I know You are up to something, but could you at least give me a hint?"

"**Lord**, I have been keeping my chin up in these strange times, but I'm beginning to wonder if we'll ever be able to get back to doing things the way they were. What's going to happen at the end of all this Covid mess?"

"**Lord**, I know I'm not supposed to be angry, but I'm angry. Why am I sick? Why am I alone? Why did You do this to me, God?"

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah (Gen 21:1).

We think this passage is about laughter. But this passage is about the Lord being gracious. More important, this gracious is not about hospitality. It's about 'paying attention to, taking care of, attending to.'

God 'paid attention' to Sarah's bitter laugh, and her doubt, and her discouragement, and He 'took care' of her, and 'attended to' her greatest wish: to have a child of her own, and give her laughter that was full and complete.

Despite all the reasons you could point to Sarah had say that she did not deserve the

blessings from God, our God, YHWH was gracious to Sarah, and understood deeply the emotions she felt, and listened carefully to her deepest longings, and stood faithfully beside her, before, during and after this moment in time when she felt true joy in life.

This is the promise that remains with each and every one of us today. Not just in difficult times, but in every-day times, and extra-ordinary times.

Our God will attend to us.
Our God will take care of us.
Our God will pay attention to us, even if we are whining and complaining; even if we are doubting ourselves, or Him; even if we are angry and bitter.

So lighten up a little, and laugh!

Laughing up to 15 minutes a day can burn up to 40 calories. Laughing uses 80 muscles, frowning only 35 and smiling, only 4.

We learn to laugh before we learn to speak. Think about that. Before the world has the opportunity to shake us up, disturb our dreams, or lose sight of all that is good, we learned to laugh.

Sarah looked down at the wonder in her arms. And for a moment, she did not doubt God. It was enough for a lifetime. And so she laughed. Amen.