

Laugh with Me

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

Have you ever noticed how contagious laughter is? How many of you have a story of being unable to stop laughing at an inappropriate time? I have a ridiculous memory that can still start me giggling 20 years later. I was 8 months pregnant, attending my first leadership team meeting that no female had previously been permitted to attend, with my womanhood on full display, tucked into the tightest back corner, when the guy next to me quoted a ridiculous movie line, mocking the irony of trying to hide the pregnant woman. I burst out laughing. The man in charge of that testosterone-filled space did not want me there. According to him, I shouldn't have been there and everyone knew it, everyone except God. I could not stop giggling and the man in charge did not find it amusing, which only made it that much funnier. You know what I mean! I know you have a friend you cannot sit next to during serious events because uncontrollable laughter will erupt. The thing about laughter is that it moves outward. Anytime we laugh, we are biologically wired to join in, widening the circle of mirth. It's contagious.

Laughter is interesting because it can signify so many different things: happiness, astonishment, relief, irony, joy. In today's story from Genesis, we see laughter display a broad range of emotion. In chapter 17, Abram laughs until he falls on his face with incredulity at God's promise. Sarah laughs too at the impossible irony of it. Later, after Isaac is born, Sarah laughs in delight and then declares that everyone who hears her story will laugh in wonderment at the power and faithfulness of God.

At the beginning of the story, when Sarah laughs, it's the laughter of a person who has learned not to expect much anymore. That may be why her story is so relatable to us. In a world where a woman's value lay chiefly in her ability to bear children, Sarah was barren. The way she viewed herself and the way the world viewed her were all

tarnished by her failure, her inadequacy, regarding something over which she had no control. There is no doubt that she spent decades hoping, month after painful month, only to be disappointed and disillusioned. Sarah laughed because her heart had walled itself off from hope. She wasn't cynical, she was disappointed. She knew better. Or she thought she did.

In today's encounter, God speaks through this delegation of three men, signaling a trinitarian presence, a divine encounter. The Lord announces life, the birth of a child from a dead womb. And Sarah laughs to herself saying, "after I have grown old, shall I have pleasure?" The word for pleasure encompasses a whole world of lost hopes. She's laughing at the impossibility of experiencing youth, vitality, freshness, sexual fulfillment, and motherhood. These are the things she was designed for; things she assumed had passed her by. The Hebrew word for pleasure is "ednah", which comes from the same root as Eden. The Garden is where perfect joy and pleasure began. And the Garden is where we will experience perfect joy and pleasure renewed. The divine messenger in Genesis was proclaiming God's supremacy beyond human limitations, God's ability and desire for human restoration.

The divine messenger did not offer the proclamation with fanfare. It was not a shocking declaration for a God of limitless power. But, for humans who live with the reality of disappointment, frustration, and limited sight, supernatural resurrection power is miraculous. The name Isaac means laughter. When Sarah declares that everyone who hears the story will laugh, she's winking at the fact that Isaac's name declares the impossibility of his own life. And with God, nothing is impossible.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he takes the reality of faith a step further. He declares that Christians boast in our suffering. He says it casually, as if it's the natural response. I don't know about you, but I'm typically a bit whinier than that about life's adversities?! But the reason he says this is not because our pain is insignificant or untrue. He is not naively optimistic. He says it because God's future is already at work within us. Those who follow a resurrected savior are convinced that God can create a future that does

not presently exist. Our distress may be very real, but God's love is deeper than our fluctuating experience of it. And it is more powerful than the limitations of our experience sometimes allow us to see. According to Paul, there are many reasons that suffering has value, it does transformative work within us. Those who have experienced suffering, who have walked through it far enough to see beyond the shroud that pain creates in the short-term, know that suffering is never meaningless and it is never the end of the story. Isaac, the child of impossibility whose very name means laughter, is the joke God told. Hope in this God brings that laughter to us, even in suffering.

When Jesus sent out the apostles, he gave them authority over unclean spirits and over every sickness. Essentially Jesus was tasking them with making the kingdom of God visible. In Jesus' kingdom, the reality of divine power is supreme. He wanted them to make visible what was becoming true. The good news in Jesus is not just life after death; it is that God's reign is breaking through into this life. For the fragmented Hebrew people, the promises were beginning to be fulfilled as God's future began invading their present experience. Creation was beginning to be restored. Sickness was being healed. The consequences of sickness were alienation and exclusion. God's power would restore even that. He was offering freedom from oppression, bringing life to the dead. Jesus' kingdom was reversing the consequences of the Fall, resurrecting pleasure, restoring Eden. The apostle's ministry was to reveal the reality of Jesus' reign. Freely they had received the power of this kingdom's restoration, and it would flow just as freely out from them.

Paul's cycle is real though. Suffering comes to us all. The Kingdom of Heaven may be breaking into this world, but until Christ's full and final victory, God's reign will be contested. Those who proclaim it the most visibly, according to Jesus, will be hated and opposed by those who God's reign threatens. Those who hold power, even we here today, have never been happy about handing it over to another, even if that other is God's own self. And so, we expect God's reign to be opposed. It doesn't mean God

has forgotten us and it certainly does not mean God is punishing us. But both things can feel true. To be a follower of Jesus is to sacrifice our own safety and use whatever power we have to bring Eden's laughter to the world's forgotten.

The testimony of all today's texts teaches us that we are all connected through the stories of God. Paul's affirmation about boasting in suffering indicates that our lives are lived and our stories told in testimony of God's work to strengthen our own faith and for the sake of others. Expressing gratitude through worship is key. It shapes what we perceive. Glorifying in God is a way of changing our relationship with our experiences. And the public announcement of God's faithfulness allows others to carry hope forward. When our own emotional resources are exhausted, others will remember our stories of God's faithfulness, and the encouragement of God's love will come back to us. Even our Psalmist experienced the blessing of having been heard by God and then released from bonds. He declares his love for God, noting that his response comes "in the presence of all God's people". Sharing in and joining God's laughter safeguards our hope.

The testimony of laughter through Isaac's birth continues to resonate with us today. God's reign is breaking into this world by degrees as we trust God's love. Even through our pain, our delighted laughter fortifies us to tell God's stories and make God's faithfulness visible for others.

In just a moment we will come to the Lord's table together. Our Psalmist says, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord". The cup signifies a thank offering, a sort of public acknowledgment of God's faithfulness. Jesus transformed this image at the Last Supper by reclaiming it as the wholehearted offering of his own blood on our behalf. When we come to this table, we are receiving the body of the One whose resurrection is the original joke God told on death. Come laughing. Leave laughing. The world needs to hear it.

May we be a people confident in the power of God's reign, who laugh with joy at God's loving faithfulness, and may our infectious laughter be a blessing to one another and the world.