***Laughter: the Best Medicine***

A sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, October 6, 2019.

Genesis 17:15-19, Genesis 18:9-15, Genesis 21:1-6

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According to the ancient legends of Genesis, Sarah, Abraham's wife, was a beauty. Just to look at Sarah was to fall in love with her. In fact, the book of Genesis tells us that is exactly what happened, at least twice—once to Egypt's Pharaoh and again to King Abimelech, the moment they saw her. Sarah was that way; she was lovely, more beautiful than an oasis in the desert, more desirable than a Florida beach home in January.

But, the story goes, for all her beauty, Sarah wasn't happy, not happy at all. You see, more than anything in the world, Sarah wanted a child. She would have traded everything she had ‑‑ her beauty, her royal suitors, her servants, her husband's wealth ‑‑ she would have traded it all in a minute for a child. Sarah was beautiful, but she was barren.

Everyday Sarah watched for the signs; but everyday she was disappointed. Sarah counted off the days of the month and waited for the morning sickness, hoping that this month would finally be the one. But nothing ever happened, Sarah, for all her beauty, was barren.

Then, according to our Genesis storyteller, sometime round about her ninetieth birthday, God stopped by the tent of Sarah and Abraham, to tell them that a child was on its way. God told those two old crones to dip into their RRSPs for a little cash to build a nursery. The writer of Genesis says Sarah laughed to hear God talk so. Her laughter couldn’t have been very pleasant, though. Sarah’s laughter was laced with unbelief, laughter tinged with anger, the laughter of cynicism and regret.

But, in a pattern that the Bible’s storytellers repeat over and over, the last laugh was God's, and Sarah became pregnant at ninety, and soon gave birth to a boy. The wonder of that little boy made Sarah laugh again, but this time, with delight. When people asked her about it, she said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears this will laugh with me." Of course. Isaac means laughter; Isaac was the laughter of God.

Thus, Israel’s funding myth is one of mirth, of bucketfuls of unexpected pleasure and joy. What is fascinating to me, this morning, however is that the writer of Genesis means for us to join in the laughter too, laugh with Sarah and her friends when we read about it.

Do you think we could do that now, here, in church? Could we laugh with Sarah for a while, laugh with pleasure on account of the sheer comedy of it?

Probably not. Some of you are even a bit nervous right now, worried that I might try and make you laugh right in the middle of the service. I mean, people come to church to sit and listen, sing a little and pray. But we don't usually laugh much.

I'm reminded of Heather. She went with the Girl Guides to a circus when she was six. When she got home she couldn't stop talking about it, and she told anyone who would listen about the ladies flying through the air, the elephants, the bears on bicycles, and especially, Heather couldn't say enough about the funny clowns. Finally, speaking to her mother, what Heather said was, "O mama, the circus was so much fun that if you ever went to it you'd never want to go to church again." And that's how it is. We don't laugh much in church.

Don't misunderstand me. When I talk about laughing in church, I'm not suggesting we laugh like people do when they see slapstick comedy. I'm not talking about the laughing that goes with making fun of some ethnic or racial minority. By laughter I mean the noisy jubilation that goes with good things happening to unsuspecting persons. When I talk about laughter in church, I’m hoping for the cheerful chuckling that fits with grace, the glee that escapes a child's lips, for example, as she discovers the goings on in a three ring circus.

And the Bible is full of stories that have that element of laughter about them, full of stories that tell of how the Israelites experienced grace and good and gladness unexpectedly triumphing over hurt and tragedy.

For example, there was the time God needed someone to convince Pharaoh to let his Israelites go. God finally settled on Moses. It turns out, though, that Moses has a speech impediment. When Moses talked to Pharaoh, it sounded as if he had marbles in his mouth . . . and yet, and yet, Pharaoh let the Israelites go, anyway.

Or again, when a wicked giant named Goliath was tramping Israel underfoot, God settled on a five foot six boy to set things straight, on a certain David, and you can bet all the little Jewish kids who heard this story laughed to see how that turned out.

But its especially stories like Sarah's that are worth laughing over, Biblical stories about unexpected births to unsuspecting parents. And the best such story is the story of the promised Messiah. All the women in Israel wanted to be one of the Messiah's ancestors. All the princesses and queens and great ladies; all the rich and powerful and famous women in Israel, all the Queen Elizabeth and Hilary Clintons of that day were sure that they were the ones God would choose to be the Messiah’s mom. But we are told that God did it his way, instead. God chose Rahab the prostitute; Bathsheba the adulterous bride to be the Messiah's ancestors. God chose Mary, a poor, unwed Galilean peasant girl to be Jesus' mother.

And if you think Sarah laughed to be a mother to Isaac at ninety, you must imagine how Mary must have laughed to think she was the mother of the Messiah at nineteen.

I’m not saying that laughter is the main note we ought to sing when it comes to our faith. We ought also stand in awe of the mysteries of God. We ought to be full of gratitude on account of the stories of love and compassion in scripture, stories that inspire the same in us, and full of resolve on account of the example of Jesus.

When we read the Bible, it ought also dawn on us that when it comes to Israel’s stories about God, her wildest dreams were never half wild enough. Not only does ninety-year-old Sarah become a mother, but God uses a whale to deliver Jonah to Nineveh; God makes manna fall from heaven. Water pours out of rocks in the desert. Persecuting Saul becomes preaching Paul. A dead Messiah is said to rise with unspeakable power. We sinners get to live like Christ. And when we read these stories, we should laugh in joy. We should laugh with Sarah and her friends on account of our unspeakable delight about the amazing, redemptive things we can do for our friends, neighbours, city, and country.

What is more, it isn’t only Davids, Jonahs, and Sarahs that God used to make his promises happen. Today God uses us. Remember what Paul said? “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1.26f). Paul means God chose average folk like us to make his kingdom, his peace, come.

Even though we modern Christians feel as if we have marbles in our mouths, God uses us to welcome refugees and feed the hungry. Even though some of us feel about five feet tall when it comes to standing up for Jesus’ values, God uses us to make a stand for the poor or the planet or even for decency. It’s God’s way in his upside-down kingdom not simply to snap his (or her) fingers, but to use everyday people like us to be his ambassadors and doers in the world. We may seem like fools, but we are all God’s fools, we are God’s clowns in a divine sort of way, and no matter how much trouble the world is in, we are a sight to behold.

The thing is, scripture suggests that it is God's way, wherever he might be among us, to use real people like us to be his lovers in the world. And while we’re at it, we Christians may seem like fools, but we are all God's fools, we are God's clowns in a divine sort of way, and so we are a sight to behold.

Now, for some of you who are hurting, all this talk of redemptive laughter may seem almost sacrilegious to you. Maybe your husband has left you, or your body is racked with pain, or your business is struggling just when it should have been thriving. Maybe you are full of fear about the sheer scale of global problems. When you laugh, it’s the kind of laughing Sarah did before she was pregnant; its laughter tinged with anger, laughter iced with cynicism and regret. What can I say? The storyteller in Genesis says that God didn't argue with Sarah, when she laughed like that, to make her change her tune. God didn't go in the tent, and tell her how good things really were. God left Sarah in her bitter laughter, to work a miracle of grace in an unexpected way.

My prayer for those who cannot today laugh joyously is that the same will happen for you, that one day you will discover that you too are one of the foolish in the world that God nevertheless uses to make delight bloom for others in surprising, unexpected ways. And I promise that eventually, even if it takes to the end of the world or happens in another lifetime, one day you will learn to laugh again. After all, Jesus promised. Jesus said, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

In sum, according to the legends that have come down to us from the ancient Hebrews and the writers of the Christian gospels, when it comes to the rest of us, what it comes down to is this. While we must never laugh at God, or make light of God, we are invited to join Sarah and laugh with God.