



Sept 17: Laughter @ the Table | Genesis 18:1-15

Have you ever laughed when it wasn't funny?

Ever giggled or grinned to cover pain and confusion?

Like Sarah did?

Sarah heard something incredible, ridiculous. A year from now she was going to have a son? What? She was too old. Abraham was too old. And so, she laughed.

Maybe it just slipped out? Like a surprise hiccup. But she did laugh.

Did she throw her head back and laugh outright for a moment or two? Or was it more like a titter into her hand? Was it a sharp snort of derision?

When I hear the word "laugh", usually it means a carefree light-hearted delight in something. But that's not really what Sarah was experiencing here. She had always wanted to have a son. But it never happened. There had to be some sadness and confusion.

Sadness and confusion stacked on top of each other, made worse because it was God himself who had promised Abraham and Sarah they would have a son of their own flesh. First promised 25 years earlier and repeated over the years.

And that through their son an unfathomable number of people would be blessed. But they had still not conceived. Still no son. Why?

And now today these visitors were also saying she would have a son. By next year no less! But those days were long gone. Abraham was almost 90 and she was WAY beyond her childbearing years. This announcement is just too much!

So, she laughed, laughter that wasn't laughter. Yet.

I have shared that same sentiment with Sarah. When laughter wasn't really laughter. When a life experience was just too much! I have laughed when something seemed very improbable. It's just NOT going to happen.

It was when I began attending seminary. In the denomination I was in, lead pastor positions for women just weren't there. Rare as hen's teeth. Never seen a female pastor there. I didn't grow up in a church, my family wasn't Christian. I didn't even like church at the time.

I went to Bethel Seminary, a Baptist seminary. They didn't endorse women for lead pastor roles. They would take my money equally as any man's. But they would not help me network with churches like they did with the guys.

So, becoming a lead pastor, felt pretty improbable and highly unlikely. It seemed laughable that I was going to find a job that matched my education and sense of call. Not as impossible as Sarah's situation but it felt pretty darn close.

I understood Sarah's laughter. I "laughed" as the years went by. "Laughed" watching tuition skyrocket. "Laughed" as the school debt ballooned and churches' staffs shrank.

I even laughed when I read this statistic. Less than 10% of female graduates from Bethel Seminary find jobs that match the education they received. That was a good one!

I was "laughing", but it wasn't joyful. Yet.

We might know what that's like. Sometimes we laugh out of nervous anxiety. And maybe we can't stop...Please, Lord, not a funeral. Help me not get going at a funeral.

Sometimes we laugh as a way to cope with challenges. And sometimes, like Sarah maybe, we laugh in doubt or confusion.

Here is a story of one woman's laughter that wasn't laughter at first. Sarah laughed in the face of the unexpected, the impossible.

Many many years earlier, the couple left their home for a new land God promised them. Over the years God told Abraham he would be the father of many nations even though he had no children, yet. But he would have a son. And everyone would be blessed through him and his offspring in the future.

Here, at this point in their story, Abraham and Sarah had pitched their tent under the branches of a massive oak tree in the desert. When suddenly, three strangers appear out of nowhere at the hottest time of the day. Where did they come from? At the worst time. Had the heat baked their brains?

Abraham quickly becomes a very gracious host. A normal meal of cakes, milk, and meat is prepared to guests that are a bit odd.

Aside from their strange arrival, over the meal they ask Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?" But how did they know Abraham was married? How did they know his wife's name?

Then they drop this emotional bombshell right in the middle of their quiet lunch. Sarah will bear a son by this time next year.

They were certainly interesting table guests.

Sarah is clearly eavesdropping, the text includes the detail that she's listening at the entrance of the tent behind Abraham. Our version of a doorway and an open door. And when she overhears their pronouncement, she laughs to herself.

Anxious laughter, unfulfilled longing, simple doubt? It's not laughter because the situation is funny. Laughter at the outrageous nature of the stranger's statement, maybe stirring difficult memories, confusion.

Sarah laughs. But it isn't laughter laughter, you know. Not yet.

At her laughter, one guest immediately questions Abraham, with a bit of heat. He quickly confronts and rebukes asking, **"Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."**

Sarah was afraid, caught in her laughter. So, she lied, "I didn't laugh".

But he persisted, "Yes, you did laugh."

And then the conversation immediately ends. It ends awkwardly. Wow!

That's weird and hard. Did Abraham at this point, as the host, begin giggling in anxiety in his own right? Trying to lighten the mood?

Because the guest was a bit angry.

Why did he ask, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Was he reminding them about God's nature...all powerful and faithful? Correcting them for their lack of faith?

They had been waiting 25 years. Had Abraham and Sarah's faith waned over that time, weakened, becoming dormant? Had they gotten a bit weary of God and his promises and having to wait? So much waiting!?

Did they get tired of hoping God would do something good? Had they become comfortable with or resigned to...their best days were behind them?

Would we judge them if that was what happened to their faith?

Is our faith in a similar place?

But God was not done with Abraham and Sarah. Three chapters later in Genesis we find out Sarah does become pregnant, gave birth to a boy. She names him Isaac, which means, "he laughs."

She says in Genesis chapter 21, **"God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me"**. Her pain and waiting have been redeemed and returned to her with joy, full to overflowing.

I can picture Sarah, in joy, lifting her son high. Looking into his eyes, saying his name out loud in delight. I can picture Sarah pulling him down, cradling him, secure in her arms, smiling down on him as she sheds tears of joy, saying, "God has brought me laughter!"

Laughter became real laughter. Because of God.

As we engage with this story about a baby boy that was predicted to come to Sarah and was born, it can be a bit tricky. There may be many here this morning, or watching online, who

have been deeply impacted by wanting and waiting, and infertility and maybe adoption. Maybe even unexpected pregnancies.

This might be a painful story for some of us, stirring things up.

Painful because our hopes have yet to be fulfilled. We've lost some confidence in God, some worry has crept in.

This story includes pain. But is also a story full of hope and laughter, real laughter. Because of God. God has been, is, and will be redeeming all of humanity. He is always up to something good. He is always doing a new thing in our midst.

God does have a plan that he has been working on since Adam and Eve exited the garden of Eden. A plan to bring laughter and hope to all people, to his children, to the world, to every Sarah in the world.

God gave Sarah a son of promise, a son of hope, a son that was a miracle. And Isaac was born. And Isaac was pointing to yet another promised son, another miracle birth.

God had promised the world a Messiah, a Savior. And Jesus was born.

We celebrate Isaac, a son of laughter.

We celebrate Jesus, the Son of hope and full redemption.

And isn't it wonderful, today we can also celebrate a new baby brother to us in Adler?

I see some of how God is at work in our midst and in our day. How about you?

For each of us, God works in unexpected ways. No one else can interpret your experiences for you. No one else can tell you the meaning of your painful experiences or how to respond to them.

I was in 11th grade when I first sensed God calling me to stand behind the pulpit. But I didn't have faith. That was never going to happen. Seminary was a long hard journey. Job outlook was low, debt was high.

Laughing but not really laughing...yet.

It took me 32 years to stand behind the pulpit. I don't stand here as a big shot. I stand here as a LONG long shot. Is anything too hard for the Lord?

God was faithful to Sarah. God has been faithful to me.

How might we expect God to be faithful to us? Here? Because God is not done with us yet.

Sarah's laughter and her choice to name her son were ways of responding to her experience of God in her life, for herself. It was Sarah's way of making meaning of what God did as she walked with him.

God invites you to make meaning of your experiences of walking with him. For ways to make meaning in your life, as God is at work redeeming all things in your life.

How do we make meaning of our shared experience of God at work in our midst?

As a church, we have a powerful role of listening to other people. Of sitting at the table with them through the waiting, through the surprises. And of looking for God at work in unexpected ways.

As a church, we have a powerful role of crying together and laughing together too. Because God is working in and through us as we do. Helping us see God at work throughout the full range of what life brings.

Dear friends, God is not done with us. God will make laughter that isn't laughter, laughter again.

So all may know joy!

As we move into a time of reflection...ask yourself the state or condition of your faith in God?

Are there places in your life where you are waiting for the Lord to do something good?

Where might the Lord be urging YOU to act on your faith and become involved at church?

Let us draw near to the Lord as we reflect.