

## Genesis 18: 1-15

If something sounds too good to be true...well, it probably is. Sometimes it's obvious...so obvious that my email warns me not to respond. It's like the one I got from a Mr. Peter Howard. "Hello my good friend" he starts off. "Good day and how are you today? Hope all is well with you and your family. I am using this opportunity to inform you that this multi-million-dollar business has been conducted with the assistance of another partner...who financed the transaction to a logical conclusion." What does that mean? How do you finance a transaction to a logical conclusion? Like I don't know a lot about finances or business, but I'm pretty sure that's nonsense. Then comes the flattery: "Due to your effort, sincerity, courage, and trust worthiness, you showed during the course of the transaction." And then there's the promise: "I have left an ATM visa card for you worth 1.2 million dollars...send us your full name, telephone number, bank account number, and your correct mailing address." A quick perusal of the subject lines in the spam folder of my email shows I've got tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars coming my way. The promise is so absurd, so impossible, it's actually a little bit funny. If something sounds too good to be true...well, it probably is, right?

In our Bible reading this morning God gives Sarah and Abraham a message that sounds too good to be true. It is the middle of a hot day. Abraham is lounging at the tent door in the shade of an oak tree trying to stay cool. The afternoon slump is setting in as everything and everyone shuts down for the hottest part of the day. Abraham's eyelids are getting heavier and he feels himself beginning to drift off when he looks up and three traveling strangers are approaching the tent. Abraham jumps to his feet, the consummate and courteous host. He runs to meet them, "Let me get you some water so you can wash the dust off your feet and rest in the shade for awhile. Are you hungry, let me get you some bread?" Hurrying into the tent he finds Sarah – maybe dozing off with her Sudoku book flopped on her lap, reading glasses perched on the end of her nose. Well, not literally, but you get the picture, it's nap time. "Sarah, we've got guests. Quick, you make the bread, I'll find a calf." The tent is sent into a flurry of activity. And just like that the traveling strangers are eating a meal of veal, with a side of hot-from-the-fire bread, cheese, and a tall glass of warm milk fresh from the source. Abraham stands off to the side like a waiter attentive to their needs.

"Where is your wife, Sarah?" one of them asks. Sarah's ears perk up at the sound of her name and she moves to the entrance of the tent to listen in – just out of sight. It's a little odd that these complete strangers know her name. But maybe they just overheard it while we were getting everything ready, she reasons. "Oh she's in the tent." Then one of the travelers says, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." Who are these people? It's weird enough that they would know her name, but how would they know about the promise?

Earlier in Genesis God had promised them that they would have many descendants, God would make them into a great nation so that all the people on earth would be blessed through them. From the time God called Abram when he was 75 years old, descendants, children have been part of the promise. But as Genesis 16:1 puts it so bluntly, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children." In view of this, God's promise seems unbelievable. If they had no children then there would be no descendants. So, as you may know, they tried to help God out a bit. Abram had a child with Hagar when he was 86 years old, and this was a pretty common practice in the day, – but that didn't really go so well. It only amplified Sarah's pain, her jealousy, her own feelings of inadequacy. It's been 13 years since then. Abraham is almost 100 years old, Sarah is 90. When God first promised them many descendants it was unbelievable, but some 24 years had passed since then – God's promise had been delayed to the point of complete impossibility. If something sounds too good to be true...well, you know.

This mysterious traveling messenger's promise to Sarah sounded about as likely as me getting a visa debit card loaded up with 1.2 million dollars. Sarah laughs to herself, just like Abraham had laughed the last time God reminded him of the promise. Not only was Sarah unable to have children in her prime childbearing years, now she's postmenopausal. There is like literally 0% chance that she's getting pregnant. And Abraham is not exactly a picture of virility anymore. As Walter Brueggemann points out, "Abraham and Sarah have by this time become accustomed to their barrenness. They are resigned to their closed future...The gospel does not meet them in receptive hopefulness but in resistant hopelessness."<sup>1</sup> At this point God's promise is so absurd, so impossible, that it's actually a little funny. But not like "haha, I'm having such a good time" funny – more like "I'm gonna laugh to keep myself from crying" funny. Maybe Sarah had been optimistic when God first promised her a son. But now she knows better now. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. She knows better than to get her hopes up. Sarah's is a laughter loaded with the pain of despair and cynicism.

We might be familiar with the sound of Sarah's laughter – we have heard it come from our own mouths, or from those of the people we love. Frederick Buechner tells a story about how after one of his speaking engagements the daughter of an old friend of his came up to see him. He writes, "She told me a horror story about her marriage—her husband had been diagnosed with premature dementia. He'd lost all sense of judgment. He would disappear for days because he wanted to get a book out of the library and the city was 600 miles away. He didn't bother to tell her where he was. He'd lost all their money, and they were being sued by their various creditors to the point that she finally divorced her husband, though she still lives with him, because otherwise what little money she had would be liable to be taken. It's just a hopeless story." Buechner writes, "I could see nothing in it that suggested there was any way out of it. But as she told it, she kept laughing this awful, chill, unearthly, inhuman laugh, as if her way of surviving her pain was to make a kind of joke out of it."<sup>2</sup>

God has promised us resurrection life – a life marked by close union with Christ, by meaningful and fulfilling relationships with each other, a life marked by shalom – peace with God, creation, each other, even our own selves. But some days God's promises for resurrection life sound so absurd, so impossible, that it's actually a little funny. We know this kind of laughter that covers up our pain. It's not a "haha, I'm having such a good time" funny – more like "I'm gonna laugh to keep myself from crying" funny. We may hear this kind of despairing laughter on our own lips when depression or anxiety threaten to choke the last bit of life and hope from our tired souls. We may hear this despairing laughter on our lips when another month of fertility treatment has passed without any signs of new life. Or when every conversation with a child or parent or spouse ends with raised voices and slammed doors. When another week of work has passed and your boss still doesn't seem to notice or appreciate your work and effort. Abundant, resurrection life? Shalom? Will we have this pleasure? We laugh to ourselves. "Sure, okay. Maybe when that visa card from Mr. Peter Howard comes through." We laugh because we know better. If something sounds too good to be true...

Sarah's laugh gives away her hiding place behind the entrance to the tent. The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.'" Sometimes there are questions in the Bible that are rhetorical questions where the answer

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggeman, *Genesis*, 159.

<sup>2</sup> Beuchner, *Crazy Holy Grace*, "The Gates of Pain".

is obviously meant to be yes or no. And actually, this does not seem to be one of those times. The question, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord” is a genuine, open-ended question that calls for a response. But we don’t hear Sarah’s response. Because on one hand, it doesn’t really matter. God fulfills God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah regardless of their response. This story gives us reason to believe that God’s faithfulness is not conditional on their belief or even the strength of their faith. When we turn the page in our Bibles we see that this is the case. “The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him” (Gen 21:1-2). God fulfills God’s unbelievable, hilariously impossible promises to Abraham and Sarah. They have traded their walkers for a stroller, they have traded the sound of Jeopardy in the evenings for the sound of Peppa Pig and Paw Patrol. Well not literally, but you get the picture. God has traded in their despairing, cynical laughter for the unmitigated joy and delight of a baby’s belly laugh and toothless smile. Isaac, the child of laughter.

The conventional wisdom is that if something sounds too good to be true then it probably is. But such is not the wisdom of the God of Abraham and Sarah. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” The Bible is full of testimonies like Sarah’s that show us, as the Apostle Paul puts it, “God was able to do what he had promised.” (Rom. 4:21). God turns Sarah’s despairing laughter into joyful laughter that radiates from her family and out into the world around them. “God has brought laughter for me,” she says as she burps little Isaac on her shoulder, “everyone who hears will laugh with me.” (Gen. 21:6)

As people grafted into God’s covenant, united to Christ in his death and resurrection, God acts in the same way on our behalf today. As God fulfills God’s promises to us, God turns our despairing, cynical laughter into hope-filled, joy-filled laughter. Back in the mid-nineties there was a Pentecostal, charismatic movement or event that came to be known as the Toronto Blessing. This took place in a church out by the Toronto airport. People who would attend services at this church would claim to experience these kind of extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit – like being slain in the Spirit – where they would just be knocked to the ground by some force, some claimed to be physically healed from pain or illness, there were reports of people barking like dogs and roaring like lions. The phenomena I am most interested in this morning is what they called “holy laughter.” One person reports that in worship as they began to focus on the unbelievable grace of God and the good news of the gospel, this person became so overcome with joy that they couldn’t help but laugh – there seemed to be no other possible response in the moment. Soon the people nearby began to laugh uncontrollably as well. And this laughter would move through the congregation like a wave as if they were doing the wave at a baseball game or something.

Now it probably won’t surprise you to hear that the Toronto Blessing garnered a good amount of theological critique and disagreements – not least of all from folks in denominations like our own. And, like, I get it. I think we’re called to test and discern manifestations of the Spirit. So if we hold up this holy laughter to the testimony of Scripture, is it plausible that this is one way God’s Spirit would be present among us today? I mean, don’t get me wrong, if one of you starts laughing uncontrollably while I’m up here preaching I’ll be just as uncomfortable as the next person...but we claim to have faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of Isaac – the God of the one-whose-name-means-laughter.

Still, God may not deal with us in such dramatic, over-the-top ways. So maybe these instances of over-the-top holy laughter don’t really strike a chord with you. Maybe when God turns our despairing laughter into joy-filled, hope-filled laughter it is more like this story the neuroscientist Sophie Scott shares about her father. Sophie’s father was very, very ill. Everyone was

sure he was about to die. The doctors didn't know what to do and everyone was just sitting there waiting for something to happen. And her father suddenly said, "We've laughed a lot, haven't we." And she said, "yes, we have." But she thought, what a strange thing to say. Years later, as a neuroscientist who now studies laughter, Sophie realized how profound his reflection was. She says, "if you can look back on a life with lots of laughter with the people around you, with the people you care about, those are not times wasted, those are the good times, those are the times that really matter, and letting yourself value rather than thinking it's a silly or a trivial waste of everyone's time, like you should be spending your time being serious, it's really worth taking the *laughter seriously*."<sup>3</sup>

God's response to our despairing laughter may not always be a kind of euphoric, charismatic, holy laughter that seems to eclipse all our problems. Maybe for us, the God of the-one-whose-name-means-laughter shows up in smaller ways too. In the laughter we share over funny memories of a lost or estranged loved one. In the jokes that catch our cynicism or stoicism off guard even for a moment.

When I think about the past year of ministry here at Community, I will remember the laughter. I'll remember the despairing chuckles over the phone when I asked how you've been handling the pandemic, or the despairing chuckles we shared as staff when another lock-down was announced...like this thing is never going to end. But I'll also remember the laughter of people in the first service we had in-person last summer, the laughter of people chatting outside afterwards. I'll even remember what it's like to see laughter over Zoom meetings when people have their microphones off. And I will thank God for the chances I had to laugh with you all. It is worth taking the laughter seriously.

This unexpected, unbidden laughter is the echo of Sarah when God had fulfilled God's promises to her. The good news of God's promise for resurrection life sounds like joyful laughter – like unexpected, good news breaking into the world where the news has been bad and the laughter has been cynical for so long. It is comedy in the highest sense – something so unbelievably good that it's hard to believe, something so out-of-the-ordinary that we laugh until tears stream down our face—but as Frederick Buechner writes, these are "glad tears at last, not sad tears, tears at the unexpectedness of things rather than their tragic expectedness."<sup>4</sup> "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Our unexpected, joyful laughter is God assuring us that no, nothing is too wonderful for the Lord – and this is the news that is too good to not be true. Thanks be to God.

Lord our God, thank you for this the gift of your word and the goodness of your promises. Help us now to receive what we have heard as that which is too good to not be true. Fill us with joy, hope, and laughter as we wait on you. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Hidden Brain podcast, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/10/683966604/the-best-medicine-decoding-the-hidden-meanings-of-laughter>

<sup>4</sup> Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 61.