

She Laughed

Genesis 21:1-7

July 4, 2021

Read Genesis 21:1-7.

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

There is nothing out of the ordinary in our passage today, right? Sarah, ninety years old, who had been barren for so very long, conceived and gave birth to Isaac. It was a miracle – one that had long been anticipated, but a miracle nonetheless. Sarah's reaction was stellar, "everyone who hears will laugh with me." She was filled with joy for the good news she had to share.

Isn't it about time for good news? In the midst of this heat, the scare of wildfires locally, as we emerge from a pandemic while hearing about this new threat of a Delta Variant on the COVID virus, after the prolonged dis-integration of our public common life in favor of tribal victimhood, with inflation, and so on..., it has just seemed like there will never be any good news. How many of you feel that way? Day after day, waiting for things to get better, waiting for things to change, it just seems like we have been trying to slog our way through mud.

Sarah's experience of God.

I want to focus our attention on Sarah today; because her experience is familiar to many of us – not the pregnancy at 90, but some of what preceded. She went through years of tough times before her prayers were answered. She knew of God's promises for a long, long, long time. Yet, for that same long time, her personal experience of God's activity in her life suggested that God was either distant or uncaring.

Think about her life's journey.

First, when Abraham was seventy-five and she was sixty-five years old, God told Abraham to leave his country and all security to go to a land that the LORD would show him. How would that have set with you? Abraham had faith and that was great for him; but his faith impacted her life, too. Sarah went with him but also left everything without any promise of security. The promise was that their descendants would be too numerous to count. Really? She could count: to zero. Abraham must have been a brave man trying to explain to Sarah how that was going to happen.

Second, after they got to the land God would show Abraham, they experienced a famine and went to Egypt. Abraham tried to foist her off on the Egyptians as his sister – not his wife. She endured. They returned to Canaan.

Third, after ten years and still no child, Sarah finally decided to take matters into her own hand. She sent Hagar into Abraham to conceive; and that turned out badly. Scripturally, it was described as the parallel to the Fall, when Eve gave the fruit of the forbidden tree to Adam. Sarah offered. Abram accepted. Hagar got pregnant. When Hagar was aware that she was pregnant, she looked with

contempt on Sarah. Sarah must have spiritually been shaking her fist at God, saying, “Why, God? Why have you tormented me to do this?”

The promises to Abraham were great, but Sarah must have wondered if things would ever look up for her. In Romans 4 Paul would describe Abraham “as good as dead.” Then, fourth, the three visitors came to their home. After feeding them a feast, Sarah eavesdropped their conversation.

“They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” 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.”” (Genesis 18:9-14 NRSV)

Of course Sarah laughed; it was ridiculous. Yet, the right question was asked, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” Indeed, nothing is too wonderful for the LORD.

Finally, as promised, Sarah conceived and delivered a son. They named him “Isaac,” a play on the word “laughter.” Sarah laughed because she was restored to the community and she laughed because she saw God fulfill a promise.

Sarah laughed because God restored her to the community.

As we have noted on several occasions, the failure to have a child meant that the wife was a failure. She lost social status if not actual status. In the ancient world, it was a serious matter for a man to be without an heir. For a woman, it was devastating. The mark of success was the number of children and the inability to conceive children was considered an ignominious character flaw.

Thus, you can almost hear the joy in her voice when she declares, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” Her joy was also a blessing to everyone around her, her laughter was with everyone. You know it is true, too: there are few pieces of news more unanimously celebrated than the birth of a child. Sarah’s joy was a celebration of the blessing and gift of a son, and it marked her personal restoration within her own community. This is an important characteristic of the hand of God: God is life-giving and life-restoring.

God is life-giving and life-restoring. In sports lingo, the monkey was off Sarah’s back. A few years ago, golf pro Phil Mickelson was known as the “best golfer to never win a major.” He bore that title graciously, but you knew it had to weigh heavily on him. When he finally won the Masters at Augusta, his relief and joy were so evident as he hugged his wife and kids. The burden he bore was released from him. And so it was with Sarah; the birth of this child was like having the green jacket -- the symbol validation and affirmation -- placed on her shoulders.

We see God act this way throughout Scripture. At the beginning of 1 Samuel, we see Hannah tormented by a rival for failing to have a child. She went to worship and wept bitterly in the

sanctuary, so much so that she drew the attention of the high priest Eli. He reported to her that God had granted her petition and she gave birth to Samuel; perhaps the greatest of the judges in the history of Israel. Validation. Affirmation.

Jesus – Emmanuel, God with us – acted the same way. In John 4, Jesus encountered the woman at the well. She had come at that hour of the day to avoid contact with others. To her chagrin, she met this strange man. However, instead of treating her like an outcast, he conversed with her. At first she did not understand him, but then he revealed himself to her. She became the first evangelist, going *back into the community* proclaiming, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” She was restored to the community that had shunned her. Validation. Affirmation.

In Mark 5, Jesus was on the way to the home of Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue, to intercede on behalf of Jairus’ daughter who was ill to the point of death. On the way a woman who had been hemorrhaging – bleeding – for twelve years touched his robe. She did so surreptitiously because contact with her would make Jesus ritually unclean. She was an outcast because of her medical condition. When she touched his robe, “immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.” Jesus stopped and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” and Jairus’ heart must have sunk, because it would have been a disaster for Jesus to become unclean. Yet, after the woman confessed, Jesus did not condemn her, but said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” Healed, she was restored to life and restored to the community. Validation. Affirmation.

To finish the story, Jairus’ servants came and told him that his daughter had already died. Jesus went to the home anyway, commanded her, “Little girl, get up,” and she was restored to life and restored to her family. God gives life. God restores life.

Is anything to wonderful for the LORD?

Sarah laughed because she saw God fulfill a promise.

God fulfilled the promise to Abraham. It took a long time. The “great heroes of faith” chapter, Hebrews 11, provides, “By faith Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’”

Scripture is clear that it was God who fulfilled this promise.

The limited role assigned to Abraham, until the naming and circumcision of Isaac, is underscored by the subjects and verbs in verse 2: “She became pregnant and Sarah bore a son...to Abraham.” Abraham is the father, but Sarah and God are the major participants. Verse 3 continues this trend even after Abraham begins to act in naming his son: Isaac is “the one *whom Sarah bore* to him.” One could also draw attention to the divine role assumed by two Hebrew words translated as “a son of his old age” (verses 2, 7). Abraham

and Sarah have been trying to have a child by natural means for many years. God, who has been promising them a son for such a long time, finally intervenes and makes it so. The human improbability of this is expressed also in verse 7: "Who would have said to Abraham, Sarah has suckled sons?" Abraham is even identified as a man 100 years old (v. 5).

This is a promised event, like so many biblical acts of God. These two people have been going around for years telling others that God has promised them a son. No wonder Abraham was said to be a prophet (Gen 20:7). The text is full of acknowledgment that God has worked this unusual birth. It also makes Sarah the focus of this divine activity in giving birth to Isaac.¹

You hear me say this over and over, but it is important that we remember it and have eyes to see when it happens: God fulfills his promises. He does what he says he will do. Even if we know it is coming, God's action is wonderful and joyous and amazing. We cannot help but join in the laughter.

So it is with a savior. God revealed his plan to provide a savior and, in the fullness of time, Jesus was born miraculously. The angels sang and the shepherds laughed and Mary pondered all those things in her heart.

God fulfills his promises.

The Promises of God for you and me.

That's all well and good for those folks – they are in the Bible and of course God would fulfill His promises for them. But what about you and me? There are a number of promises God has made in Scripture for us. I want to highlight just a few:²

1. **He has promised to supply every need we have.** "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus". That's Philippians 4:19. Now notice, God has obligated Himself only to the extent of our needs. *He knows* what we need – and that may look very different than what *we think* we need. It includes our physical and spiritual needs. This is important to remember when we think that we are drowning or walking alone. He has promised to supply every need we have.
2. **God has promised that His grace is sufficient for us.** (2Corinthians 12:9). He has made provision for our salvation by His grace through faith. No matter our circumstances, no matter how hard we try, we are able to stand only by grace. We are able to live and move and have our being, and we have been adopted as children of the King of kings, Lord of lords all by His grace – grace which is sufficient for us.

¹ http://www2.luthersem.edu/Word&World/Archives/14-2_Genesis/14-2_Frerichs.pdf

² Readers' note: the structure of these promises was provided by: <http://www.bible.ca/d-7promises-god.htm>

3. **God has promised that His children will not be overtaken with temptation.** When temptation arises – either by surprise or when we have gone looking for it – God assures us that a way of escape will be provided. (I Corinthians 10:13). The Lord’s Prayer includes, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” We pray with confidence because, “Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever.” God is sovereign. We can trust his promise that we will never be tempted beyond our capacity – and that he is with us, wherever we go, even to the very end of the age.
4. **God has promised us victory over death.** Death has been swallowed up in victory, “Where, O Death, is thy victory; where, O Death, is thy sting?” God verified, affirmed, and established his sovereignty over death by the resurrection of Jesus. And, in conquering death, he assures us of his power to grant us victory over death as well. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:3-5 NRSV)
5. **God has promised that all things work together for good to those who love and serve Him faithfully** (Romans 8:28). It may be difficult for us to see and understand how this is accomplished at times, but God has promised it, and He will deliver. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9 NRSV) Trust in God’s faithfulness – even in the most difficult of circumstances or darkest of times – will not disappoint.
6. **God has promised that those who believe in Jesus and are baptized for the forgiveness of sins will be saved.** The people asked the apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter responded, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38). “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” (Romans 10:9-11).
7. **God has promised His people eternal life** (John 10:27,28). Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

These are promises to hold, promises onto which to cleave, to stand, and to treasure. They may not all be fulfilled today, or in a time frame that makes us comfortable, but we are assured that God will be faithful to his promises to you and to me.

It is these promises and the assured hope they represent that we celebrate when we come around this table today. In this meal, Jesus declared to the disciples the new covenant in which God’s eternal promises are realized. It was a declaration of independence from the power of sin and

death. The preacher of Hebrews marveled that, “through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.” He frees us. How awesome is that news. How amazing are those promises. “Everyone who hears” – who receives the gospel – “will laugh with me.”

Conclusion

The birth of Isaac did not mean the end of troubles for Abraham and Sarah. This is not the “happily ever after” moment of a fairy tale. It *is* a happy moment. Sarah celebrates with laughter and joy. She has been redeemed. God has been gracious to her. The promises have been real and God’s word has been made true.

As we prepare to come around this table, ask yourself the same question that was posed when Sarah was eavesdropping at the tent entrance, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” Remember God’s faithfulness to you in your life, and commit yourself to trusting the LORD no matter the circumstances. It is worth it: when you see God’s promises revealed, you too will say, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Amen.

COMMUNION

Questions:

1. How does Sarah’s life journey strike you – are you encouraged or discouraged by her example? How so and why?
2. When, where, how, and for whom have you seen God’s promises fulfilled?
3. When has God “brought laughter” for you such that “everyone who hears will laugh with you”?