

Sometimes You Gotta Laugh
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 2A
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

From now until the middle of August, Revised Common Lectionary readings from the Hebrew Bible tell some of the most significant stories in the book of Genesis. Today we encounter two of the great patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith: Abraham and Sarah. It IS their paternal and maternal identities we're interested in today, because God has made them a promise; they are going to have a son. God's promise is much bigger than that, actually. Way back in chapter 12, when Abraham and Sarah were introduced, God said to them, "I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing . . . *All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you.*" So it was an *ALL-ENCOMPASSING* promise! . . . one that was meant to begin *VERY SMALL* – small as a baby in Sarah's womb.

Abraham and Sarah had left their home in response to that promise. They had traveled to a strange land and settled amongst foreign people and lived for years in the strength of God's promise. But as we meet them today, they are past believing it will come true. Both of them are! We see it in Sarah today, in the way she laughs when she hears the promise restated. But it's true for Abraham, too. Turn the Bible back a page, and we find Abraham "falling on his face, laughing" when God appears to him and says "I will bless Sarah, so that she will become nations. Kings of peoples will come from her." Old Abraham can't even *STAND UP*, he is laughing so hard.

This promise God made to Abraham and Sarah here at the start of the Hebrew Bible is echoed throughout scripture – quite notably at the start of the Christian gospels. We hear God's promise in the song Mary sings in the gospel according to Luke, when an angel appears to Mary announcing her pregnancy, which was just as impossible as Sarah's pregnancy. Where Sarah is old and post-menopausal, Mary is young and a virgin. She *CAN'T* be pregnant. Yet her child, like Sarah's, is meant to be part of spreading God's blessing all around the world, even to you and me.

With both of these pregnancies, we are hearing that it's time not just to paint a nursery It's time to celebrate the advancement of God's blessing around the world. It is time to beat swords into plowshares. (We might say guns into gardening tools.) It's time to anticipate not *NEEDING* tools of self-defense or warfare anymore, because every place will be *SO PEACEFUL*. Everyone will have what they need to live. Everyone will feel confident that they belong. Everyone will see justice being done and love practiced. *THIS* is the hope that brings us together today! On some level we all *CLICKED THE LINK* to this sermon in response to these promises of God! At the same time . . . it's hard not to *LAUGH* in light of what we see happening in the world. How could God's promises possibly come true?

Today's story points to what happens to people when we give up on the promises of God.

Walter Brueggemann says, “The word of God ... never comes to fruition as we expect it,” and so often we conclude that God’s word has failed. Brueggeman says that *WHEN* we conclude God’s word has failed, either we are driven back to our own seemingly adequate resources or, if we have no resources, we are driven to despair.”

We fall back on our own seemingly adequate resources or, if we have no resources, we fall into despair.

Let’s think for a moment about how these responses can look. In today’s story it looks like laughter. Abraham and Sarah saying, “A child. That’s funny. But obviously it’s too late for us.” In *ANOTHER* part of their story (a part that seems shameful today, but was common at the time), Abraham and Sarah gave up on God’s promise and so compelled another woman, an enslaved woman named Hagar, to bear Abraham’s baby in Sarah’s stead. (Clearly I could preach a whole ‘nother sermon about that.)

Giving up on the promises of God. When *YOU AND I* do it, how can *THAT* look?

- It can look like human trafficking – men, women, and children manipulated and enslaved, even in our cities, *even today*, when we WANT to think we’ve come so far.
- It can look like soaring unemployment rates, inadequate safety nets, families who’ve been evicted from their homes.
- It can look like riots in the wake of another black life not just lost, but TAKEN, and taken too soon.
- Giving up on the promises of God ... it can look like irreconcilable differences – in a government, in a marriage or a family, in ANY community – we stop trying to understand each other, stop imagining God’s blessing upon *every one of us*.
- It can also look like UTTER DESPAIR in the face of illness and death; we lose our health and our hope at the same time.

When we give up on the promises of God, we are driven back to resources that may *SEEM ADEQUATE* but are less than ABUNDANT. Or we are driven to despair . . . when we think God’s word has failed.

At this point in *THEIR* story, that’s what Sarah and Abraham thought. God’s word had failed. This was after *YEARS* of faithfulness – years of trusting – but *COME ON*. At some point, you gotta laugh.

I have a friend who did some research on “laughter” in the Bible. The words “laugh” and “laughter” appear just 38 times in scripture – mostly when God laughs at human folly. That makes Sarah’s laugh is unique and fun. This may seem tangential, but I think it’s oddly relevant for us. Sarah laughs not only at the thought of God’s biggest promise coming true. She has it in view, I’m sure, that God might bless *THE WORLD* through a baby she’d bear. But what’s funny to Sarah is not just the idea of *GETTING PREGNANT* at her age, but the thought of *ENJOYING THE PROCESS* of getting pregnant at her age. Sarah says, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”

I'M JUST SAYING. That's fun.

And it seems so frivolous! . . . in light of all the pain in the world. Which reminds me of an interview I heard not long ago: Krista Tippet interviewing Ross Gay. Ross Gay is a poet who wrote book of essays called "*The Book of Delights*". Tippet asked him about delight, which can seem like a luxury. Like Sarah thinking about her pleasure, when the fate of the world is in view. Or like ice cream for lunch, maybe. Krista Tippet had just met with a group of philanthropists and leaders of nonprofits, people who take the suffering in the world seriously, and are trying to do some good in response to it, and someone there had said, "How can we possibly be joyful in a moment like this?" So she asked Ross Gay about that, whether joy is a luxury.

Gay spoke about *the NECESSITY* of joy in the midst of suffering, and about how important it is to pay attention to what's delightful and beautiful in the world, not as a way of ignoring what's terrible, but because joy can draw us out of our alienation. Joy can remind us about our connections to other people and to *everything*, really.

Around the time I was thinking about this, one of my friends shared something on Facebook about the Rwandan prescription for depression. A Rwandan was reflecting on the mental health care offered their community after the genocide in Rwanda. Folks from outside their community wanted to come in and talk, one on one, in small rooms, for an hour at a time – classic western therapy. But what was needed, according to this Rwandan, was to be outside in the sun where you begin to feel better, and to dance to music and drumming, which would get your blood flowing again, and to know that there were others in your community who would take the day off in order to gather to lift you up and bring you back to joy. Sun and drumming and dancing and community – that was their prescription for depression. *Joy is necessary to draw us out of our alienation and to remind us of our connections.* That's what Ross Gay says, too.

And Gay says something else – something I found pretty strange, 'til I realized it's pretty Christian: Gay ties our joy to our mortality. He says our joy is connected to the fact that *we're all going to die*. We have, for one thing, these short lives that are therefore precious lives . . . and also: we are *ALL* in the process of dying, and *UNDERSTANDING THAT* about one another can make possible a sort of tenderness between us, and an openness between us . . . maybe like the openness of Abraham to his three strange visitors, or the openness of Sarah to her dried-up husband Abraham, or the openness of Rwandans in mourning to their neighbors in pain, or the openness we might feel toward *OUR neighbors* in our congregations, or in our cities or counties, or across the country, or across the sea.

Those notions around joy and mortality and connection are very Christlike, I think . . . because the one thing that *WAS* impossible for Christ was to escape the cup of suffering. Jesus prayed for that in Gethsemane, do you remember? He didn't want to die on the cross. But he had to. And that necessity was tied to Christ's tenderness for us – his compassion for all the ways that we suffer in the brief lives we live. And *OUR JOY* is

tied to Christ's willingness to enter such a life of brevity and pain – to share that life with us.

So joy isn't easy. And it isn't frivolous. It's just possible. Walter Brueggemann says that everything is possible for those who stay through the dark night of barrenness with God. As Jesus did. As Sarah and Abraham did. As you and I sometimes do. Everything is possible, because God stays with us through the night, through the barrenness, and God is faithful to God's promises. That's the testimony of today's story and of scripture as a whole: that God shows up, faithful to the promises God's made.

And we can see it! We can see it sometimes most readily in the small and everyday things that bring us delight. Things that bring a smile, that bring pleasure, that draw us together (even virtually). These are beautiful things we can anticipate and seek out – things we're bound to notice, if we'll just pay attention. But we can learn God's faithfulness in *IMPOSSIBLE* things, too – things we would never have seen coming. *God is faithful in miraculous things* – in the right thing happening at *just the right time*, for instance ... or when the grip of death or hopelessness or barrenness is broken, and a *NEW* thing happens in a way we can't explain.

Consider this story an invitation to openness – to re-embracing God's promises and recognizing God's fidelity to those promises. I don't know where you need to do that, but if you're like me (or if you're like Sarah and Abraham), you need to do it someplace. Where do you feel yourself sinking into despair? Where do you see yourself settling for something less than God has promised? (Less than justice, say? Less than love? Less than peace?) What makes you laugh . . . with skepticism or cynicism or secret hope? Pay attention in those places. The story says: *God is paying attention to you.*

—Carla Pratt Keyes © 2020