

“The Last Laugh” – Genesis 18:1-15 – June 18, 2017
Rev. Rachel A. Wann

I remember back in school – I’m not sure if it was high school or college, probably both – but at some time or another as part of my coursework, we students were required to map out our futures. It was called the 5-year plan and the 10-year plan. The goal was to imagine where we might find ourselves 5 or 10 years down the road. Would we go on to advanced schooling, would we have a career, would we be married with children? Who knew? Dutifully I took this task to heart and imagined how I thought my own future would play out – there I was completing graduate school, a career as a high school band director, composing music, and perhaps married to a fellow musician or teacher. I took this assignment seriously, and as I wrote the words on the page, I believed those images could actually become reality. I look back at that and laugh.

Perhaps you too have experienced some surprise or disbelief in how things have turned out for you. We think, that could never happen in my life. There’s no way that that would ever happen to me. Perhaps you too have laughed at a particular turn of events that has occurred in your own life.

I think some of the Biblical commentators are too hard on Sarah. They admonish her lack of faith. They rebuke her for her inability to believe the promise of God that she would give birth to a son. But come on now, the woman is 89 years old; she is past menopause, and a strange man who has just had a meal in her tent, informs her that she will conceive a son and give birth within the year. No wonder she laughs. Wouldn’t you?

There are a few things we should take into consideration before condemning poor Sarah for her laughter. It had been about 25 years since Abraham first heard the call of God to pick up his family and move from their homeland. It had been 25 years since God first promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations, yet his wife Sarah had yet to have any children. Abraham and Sarah were still really just getting to know this God. They lived in a world where numerous gods and idols were worshipped. So who was this new God? Who was this God that comes knocking on your tent flap for a bite of lunch one lazy day?

About 13 years previous to our story, Sarah realized that she wasn’t going to bear any sons for Abraham. She offered to him her slave girl named Hagar and Hagar bore a son name Ishmael. When Ishmael was an adolescent, God again appeared to Abraham and established with him and his people the covenant of circumcision. At this time Abraham was 99 years old. God again told Abraham that he would bless his wife Sarah, and that she would bear a son. Abraham fell on his face in laughter – so see – Sarah wasn’t the first to laugh at this news!

So then one day not long after, three men approached Abraham’s tent. Following the cultural rules of hospitality, Abraham invited them in, washed their feet, and gave them food and drink. Abraham even went beyond what was typically expected and provided these men a lavish meal. Then unexpectedly, the conversation focused on Sarah. The men asked, “Where is your wife Sarah?” Then one man spoke up and said, “I am going to come back at a later date, and by then your wife Sarah will have a son.” Sarah, who had been standing at the tent entrance, laughed in amused astonishment, “Yeah, right.”

In Sarah’s mind, the thought of bearing a child was simply impossible. There was no way, according to what she understood about the world, that she could conceive and bear a child at her age. So, in response to the comment she heard from her husband’s guests, she laughed quietly to herself. But her response did not go unnoticed. Suddenly, the Lord spoke to Abraham asking, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Again, remember, Abraham and Sarah are still learning who God is and what God can do. Abraham had already exhibited his faith in this new God when he pulled up his stakes and moved from his home, following God’s call. It had been 25 years before when God had told Abraham that his descendants would be as

numerous as the stars in the heavens. As each year passed, it must have been harder and harder to believe that promise, especially after Sarah was physically past menopause. For Sarah to bear and give birth, that would indeed require divine intervention.

When we think about God at work in the world, we struggle with understanding how far God's reach can go. Like Sarah's barrenness, there are areas within our own lives that seem off limits to God - those impossibilities that are ruled by logic and pragmatism and seem to be light years away from the realm of divine intervention. For each one of us, those off-limits segments of our lives will be different. It is perhaps easy to affirm that God is indeed at work in the big picture, in the overall scheme or plan of the world. But does God in fact penetrate into the seemingly impenetrable? Or perhaps we should ask instead, not does God, but CAN God? Does God, can God, really impact the areas of our lives that could use a little divine intervention? It is here that we, like Sarah, laugh and scoff a bit, maybe thinking, God has better things to do than to fool with my little part of this world.

And that should cause us to wonder what in fact do we really believe about God? Do we believe in the God who is revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ? That God is a God of grace, of hope, of promise, of new beginnings? Do we in fact believe that the Holy Spirit is indeed active in our world, in our church, and in our personal lives, bringing about transformation and growth? Do we actually trust God to address our needs? Or do we pay lip service to a few worn out platitudes, such as - it is in God's hands, God is in control, God's will be done. Do we believe those statements, or are they just a way of resigning ourselves to an attitude of fatalism? What will be will be. Resigning ourselves to the whims of the impersonal fates is easier than claiming the promises that God has given to us.

Let's skip ahead a bit - in chapter 21 of Genesis, Sarah gave birth to a bouncing baby boy. God instructed them to name the child Isaac. The joke here is that in Hebrew the name Isaac means "He who laughs" or "laughter." God has the final word, the last laugh. God was not angry with Sarah, or Abraham, when they had previously laughed at the news of Sarah's impending motherhood. God recognized their inability to understand what was about to happen. And now, Sarah can laugh with joy and say, in chapter 21, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me...who would have ever said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age!" This time her laughter is filled with wonder and joy. No doubt she was the talk of the town.

Sarah had lived in a barren world with no future. Past the age of childbearing, there was absolutely no hope of having a baby. But as this lesson has taught us, what seemed to be an ending actually became an opportunity for a new beginning. A chance for a new start, the occasion for new possibilities. We all face dead ends in our own lives. Relationships that become stagnant, jobs that seem to go nowhere, experiencing the loss or illness of a loved one, being plagued with any manner of afflictions of body, mind or spirit, living a daily existence that seems without hope or purpose. Sometimes we simply find ourselves walking on a never-ending treadmill of mediocrity. We are caught in a rut that is too deep for us to pull ourselves out.

Yet in the barrenness of our lives we hear the message of new beginnings. We learn that our God is a God of hope and promise. We discover that the Holy Spirit can stir the winds of change and renewal, and from the dust of dry and lifeless soil can come new growth and new possibilities. This God can bring about new beginnings from the barren places in our lives. This God can do those things, which we cannot do for ourselves. This God can do the impossible. This God can change the derisive laughter of doubt and cynicism into the gleeful laughter of joy and delight.

Pastor and author Frederick Buechner writes, "Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it

suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough." (Peculiar Treasures, p. 173)