

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7  
**Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart<sup>i</sup>**

1<sup>st</sup> of 5: *Sarah Laughs*

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 8, 2021

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*Introduction to Scripture Lessons:*

Today we will open our food manual, aka the Bible, to a very old story, even by biblical standards, this one is way back in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapter 18. It might help you with menu planning in case an unexpected guest (or three) drop by *your* home. You will see Abraham get his servants and wife to whip up this fancy feast for their guests who appear out of nowhere at their tent in the hazy heat of the day.

Note the careful attention given to the amount and quality of the flour and of the meat—not just any old calf, but one that is tender, and young, tasty. Abraham does this, with great haste (the pace may get you panting a bit) having *no* idea what this meal could possibly lead to. Never underestimate the mystical power that the generous hospitality of a good meal can unleash.

Just to set the scene, picture Abraham and Sarah with sagging skin and deeply lined faces, at this point in the story they are tired and resigned to a life unraveled from what they expected. They are both in their nineties—yes Sarah is about 90 and Abraham is 99. When they were younger, God had promised big things, that they would produce heirs as many as the stars. Well, that didn't turn out. They had tried a workaround or two, but their efforts had spun a web of consequences that would cause hurt and hate and resentment all around. You could say they figured "it is what it is. And at this point in our lives, whatever we may have thought God had promised us, this is it. This is the hand we've been dealt." Or is it?

*Sermon:*

"LOL." Text message lingo for "Laugh Out Loud. If you think about it, the expression is rather ironic, since you are actually thumbing or typing the letters "LOL" into your cell phone, iPad, or whatever communication device you have on hand—and there's no sound involved—chances are you're not *really* laughing out loud. It's just shorthand for saying, "that's really funny!"

When was the last time you had a really good laugh? Not just a laugh to cover the silence, or a laugh because you were nervous, or a laugh to fit in because everyone else was laughing, but a deep spontaneous belly laugh? Laughing, I understand, is a uniquely human phenomenon. A gift from God, really. Did you know scientific study indicates that deep laughter from the belly, actually releases serotonin into our bloodstream? Laughter has an effect similar to antidepressants. Laughing activates the release of the neurotransmitter serotonin, the same brain chemical affected by the most common types of antidepressants, SSRIs. Laughter can actually trigger biochemical stress reduction. But—we all know that laughter can also be difficult to control. It can be really embarrassing. The harder you try not to laugh – the worse it gets.

In today's story, Sarah, the wife of Abraham, has one of these spontaneous eruptions of laughter, but she gets caught. It's very easy to picture how Sarah on the inside of the tent would overhear this outrageous announcement just a few feet on the other side of Abraham. Tent walls are very thin when it comes to sound. Any of you who have camped in close quarters, know exactly what I'm talking about. The first night we ever spent in Marshfield was in a tent at the county fairgrounds when our two daughters were teenagers. We were on a week-long trek called "Bike Wisconsin" where every night about 1100 people slept in tents with maybe 10 feet between each tent...if you're lucky. Yes, deep in the night, you hear it all: snoring, grunting, babies crying, and other sounds I won't go into here.

Sarah's laugh from inside the tent, was definitely heard. And not only that, it was told and retold and then written down and became part of the Bible. This was an embarrassing moment that would not be forgotten. What she heard was absolute nonsense. There is a lot going on in this story that I could preach about. But today, listening to that deep belly LOL laughter of Sarah's, has led me to a sermon about one of God's signature moves. What am I talking about? I'm talking about God's use of *surprise*. Sarah was definitely surprised by the news she heard. She was totally caught off guard. But on camera. Luckily for us. Let's have a closer look at this snapshot together.

We have a little "he said/she said" caught forever in Genesis 18: 13-15. "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh...But Sarah denied, saying 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.' God's big reveal, and she laughed out loud. In God's face, so to speak. Would you say Sarah responded correctly, giving the "A Response" to this amazing promise? If we compare Sarah's response to young Mary's when the angel Gabriel announced that she would be giving birth to Jesus, maybe not. You will recall, Mary asks Gabriel (not laughing) "How can this be since I am a virgin?" And Gabriel explains (sort of) – starting with the "Holy Spirit will come upon you" and ending with "For God nothing will be impossible." And then Luke records Mary's response as: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38). Older, wizened, been-around-the-block a-few-times Sarah, did not say, "Here am I" but instead she laughed out loud, and then denied that she had laughed.

As inspiring as the faithful, "yes" response of Jesus' future mom, Mary is, I'm pretty sure that Sarah's laughter of disbelief and surprise hits closer to home for most of us. Sure, we'd like to think that if an angel came to us and told us about some incredibly important and miraculous job that God had selected us to do, we would respond like Mary did. But honestly, I think I might laugh, be skeptical, and then get embarrassed and quickly try to cover it up, too.

Did you ever wonder how this story ever even made it into the Bible? It's so human and it makes Abraham and Sarah seem so common and ordinary. If you were putting together the story of Bible heroes and heroines – wouldn't this be a deleted scene? Maybe it would be included as an out take of the "Father Abraham" series. But here it is, right in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis.

This is the beauty of our Good Book. It contains these raw and real, these messy moments. They are glimpses of what Brian D. McLaren calls *Naked Spirituality* in his book by that title. The Bible shows us how to look for and find God. This particular story exemplifies one of God's favorite work zones I'm calling "the surprise zone." When we get surprised, our own blockades and defenses against God get knocked down—even if for only a moment. The veil gets drawn back: and amazing, crazy things can happen. Things we might say were impossible. If you want to experience the transforming power of God, get ready to be surprised by God!

I'll say that again: *Get ready to be surprised by God*. The irony in this message is intended. The longer I live and look for God's presence, God's power moving in my life and the life of those around me, and in this world in which we live---the more I realize that what I'm calling "the surprise zone" is a place where God's grace can work mightily. Here is a place, if even for just a few seconds or moments if we're lucky, we can see and feel God's presence working in us, changing us for the better. The "surprise zone" is the land where what seems impossible can become possible. The "surprise zone" is where our hearts can expand according to God's specifications.

I want to be very clear here about what I'm not saying.

- I am *not* saying that every surprise is of God. Or that surprises are always good. Certainly not.
- *Nor* am I saying that God's surprises are the answer to our prayers, to our wishes and desires. Do you think that Sarah really wanted to wait until she was 95 to have a baby? Any of you grandparents who take care of your grandchildren all night long without the help of parents, know what I'm talking about.
- *Nor* am I saying that once God surprises us and fulfills a promise or a dream we have, that everything is going to be wonderful and beautiful and go according to our plans from that point on. If you read even into the next chapter of Genesis you will see Sarah dealing with new issues and conflicts between her son Isaac and Hagar's son, Abraham's other son, Ishmael.

I *am* saying that the hand of God, the signature of God, the work of God is often revealed in surprises large and small. Sarah's surprised laughter brought forth this question: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" The Hebrew word translated in the NRSV as "wonderful" is also translated as "too hard, or impossible". There isn't really an exact English equivalent. So try to hold these multiple meanings in your mind at the same time – "Is anything too wonderful/too hard/too impossible for the Lord?"

No actual answer is given in the story to this question. Abraham and Sarah don't know the answer. They've been through a lot of tough situations and probably wondered themselves. This very question is asked over and over again and again in the Old Testament, and finally answered definitively by Jesus. God answers God's own question with the birth, life, death of his son, Jesus. And then most decisively by raising Jesus from the dead, on Easter. That was *God's* answer. I wonder if anyone laughed in disbelief when they heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

But what is *our* answer today? Do we live like we are ready to be surprised by God? Or do we get up in the morning, burdened with what is, determined to soldier through, resigned and defended. I hear Jesus calling us to think and to live otherwise. Jesus hears the struggles of our hearts. Jesus knows that is unraveling before our very eyes this day. Perhaps there is a person or a problem you cannot stop thinking about, even during this sermon. Take heart, this story is calling us to get ready to be surprised by God. The answer, the way forward, may be completely different from what you expect.

I was surprised here at FPC recently. Most delightfully, actually, when two committees, Building & Grounds and also Christian Education, as well as the entire session supported enthusiastically and unanimously the recommendation that we install rainbow-colored crocheted sleeves on our two lampposts, on Lincoln and Adler to signal our whole-hearted embrace of those who identify as LGBTQ in our community. A sign that is clear to those who are looking—not unlike the ancient ichthus fish symbol used in the early days between Christians when they were a maligned and persecuted minority. Our sign these days, maybe a surprise some who would not imagine a church to be a safe and welcoming place for them.

Siffan Hassan, an Ethiopian refugee who took up running while studying to be a nurse in the Netherlands, has become a famous Olympic star for the Netherlands team. Not only for her amazing speed and strength. But just this week, she did something truly surprising as well as extraordinary. She tripped and fell with one lap to go in a preliminary heat of the women's 1500m but got back up to continue the race. And proceeded to win her heat to advance. She went on to win the gold medal in the Women's 5,000 and 10,000 meter races, and bronze in the 1500 meter race. That was an unraveling and weaving together caught on camera for the whole world to see. Check it out on YouTube, if you haven't seen it yet. Or if you need a fresh shot of inspiration.

We all trip and fall. Sometimes we do it to ourselves. Other times something or someone trips us up, no matter how hard we try. But here's the thing: in the midst of our dramatic upsets, and our quiet resignations—comes our surprising God, who gave old, old Sarah her first born baby son. A baby they named, "Isaac" which means "laughter." Wrinkled, resigned, Sarah, who laughed out loud in disbelief and joy at God's surprising gift which is, new life.

*Let us pray:* Now, in this hour of free-fall, Be your good self again, Meet us not according to our flaw, But according to your generous self-giving: Be our Christmas, And start the world again; Be our Easter, And draw us from death to new life; Be our Pentecost, And breathe on us to begin again; Be your full, generous self toward us; We will begin again in obedience, And as we can obey, We will begin again in wonder, love, joy. ....*and laughter.* <sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon theme series, "Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart," was created by Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Sanctifiedart.org.

<sup>ii</sup> From the prayer titled, "When Life Crashes" by Walter Brueggemann in *Prayers for A Privileged People*; (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2008) p. 116.