

Sermon for June 18, 2017: Dawn Bakken

“So Sarah laughed to herself.” Genesis 18, verse 12 caught my attention as I was first reading the lectionary texts for this Sunday. I couldn’t remember too many people described in the Old Testament as laughing. For that matter, I didn’t recall too many folks in the New Testament either. In the Psalms, Israel’s enemies are laughing at them or, more often, God is laughing (laughing to scorn is a common phrase) at those who would oppose him. In the first chapter of Proverbs, Wisdom invites people to come to her but turns against those who rejected her: ³⁶ you neglected all my counsel And did not ³⁷ want my reproof; **26** I will also ³⁸ laugh at your ³⁹ calamity; I will mock when your ⁴⁰ dread comes.” In Luke’s gospel, Jesus says: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

Laughter seems to be a complicated matter in scripture. And when we step outside the text for today and look at the longer narrative arc of the book of Genesis, there are few more complicated stories about laughter than that of Sarah.

We first come across Sarah in chapter 11 of Genesis, in the middle of a genealogy starting with Noah, then his son Shem, until the text reaches a man named Terah who has three sons, including Abram. Abram’s wife is named Sarai and we learn one thing more about her: “Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.”

To follow the rest of this story and to arrive at today’s text, I’m going to suggest that we listen to the succession of events in the lives of Abram and Sarai (soon to be renamed, by none other than God) as most ancient Israelites would have heard ---- told aloud.

Scholars surmise that after the Jews who had been held captive in Babylon returned to their homeland in 538 BCE, their priests and scribes began to write down both their legal traditions and the stories about their ancestors. But for most people, those stories would have been told aloud, sometimes on festival days to crowds and almost certainly more often in small family groups around a fire at night.

So Sarai’s story begins in the ancient land of Ur, in what is now southern Iraq and close to the ancient shoreline of the Persian Gulf, when she marries a man named Abram, one of three brothers. After some time, Terah and much of his extended family, begin to move westward through the Arabian Desert. More time passes and Terah dies. And then in the middle of the desert, Abram has an encounter with the divine. This God tells Abram to separate from his larger family clan, and go to a land that God will show him. “I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you,” God tells Abram. So Abram and Sarai, along with Abram’s nephew Lot and his family, and their servants and their flocks set out again westward across the great desert.

Pause: what’s wrong with this story? How is this supposed to work? You have a man with a wife but no children and God never said: “Make sure you bring along that nephew of yours, Lot, because I have great things in store for him” (because, of course, Lot and most of his family will come to a most unhappy ending---but that’s another story).

Abram and Sarai and the rest of the group arrive in Canaan. And here God comes again, making promises to Abram: “To your offspring I will give this land.” What offspring? At

this point, the listeners, most of whom have heard this story before, are settling in for all the twists and turns, because there's a doozy coming right up.

Time goes by and a famine strikes the region of Canaan. Abram and Sarai and their clan head southward into Egypt, hoping to find fertile land to graze their flocks close to the Nile River. Then Abram really throws a wrench into the works. "Just look at how beautiful you are," he says to Sarai. "Just in case some powerful Egyptian decides he wants you, since we're powerless in this strange land, you tell everyone you're my sister." Tell them this, Abram says, "that it may go well with me because of you and that my life may be spared on your account." Enter into our tale no-one but the Pharaoh himself, who swoops in and takes away Sarai. And lo and behold, Abram is right, at least at first. Everyone lives and Abram becomes wealthy as a result of Pharaoh's generosity and good will.

So, hit the pause button again: we're supposed to be hearing about a group of people in Canaan and they're all in Egypt now, and Abram still doesn't have any children, and now his wife is living in the court of the Egyptian pharaoh, presumably either as a wife or a concubine, and there's no indication in this tale that Abram ever expected to get his wife back again.

But it's God who is truly writing this story and now God steps in. Abram is a coward and an opportunist and he has treated his wife like an animal; the fact that under the patriarchal society of the day this was not only possible but certainly done to more women than Sarai does not make it right. God intervenes and afflicts Pharaoh's household with a few pre-Exodus plagues. Pharaoh figures it all out somehow. "What is this you have done to me?" he asks Abram.

So the whole clan is expelled from Egypt but Abram arrives back in Canaan a much wealthier man, the respected head of a large and prosperous clan. Lot and Abram have a few more adventures in chapters 13 and 14, and then we get back to the heart of the story. Abram and God are in the midst of one of their periodic discussions and Abram finally lays out the problem: What will you give me, for I continue childless? And since this conversation is taking place in the middle of the night, God says Look up and look at the stars --- that's how many descendants you will have. And, we are told, Abram believes in God's promise.

Now to the next part of the tale, which we can treat only in part. The triangle, soon to be a complicated rectangle, of Abram and Sarai and Sarai's Egyptian maid, Hagar. Ten years have passed since the return from Egypt and still no children for the couple. Now, for the first time in the story, we hear Sarah's voice.

"The Lord has prevented me from having children," she tells her husband. Let me have a child through my slave. Sarai, as the text says, "gives" Hagar to Abram, echoing the way in which Abram handed over Sarai to Pharaoh. Some very complicated power relationships going on in this story. Sarai uses what power and influence she has as the wife of the head of the clan and as Hagar's mistress and owner; she makes a desperate attempt to secure her position by giving her husband a son, even though she will not be its biological mother.

And now the story picks up speed again. Hagar becomes pregnant and makes a power grab of her own. She acts disrespectfully toward Sarai and Sarai is having none of it. It is tempting to hear the frustration and anger of a lifetime in Sarai's words to her husband: "May the wrong done to me be on you!" she exclaims. I did this for you and look what happened. Now, she says dramatically, "May the Lord judge between you and me."

Abram caves. As the head of the clan, he could, no doubt should, have found a way to adjudicate between the women. Instead, he says, "Your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please." And Sarai takes out her rage on Hagar and expels her from the clan.

Now comes the dramatic scene of a desperate, pregnant Hagar alone in the desert when an angel appears. God, it seems, does not take sides in the way that Abram did. Hagar receives her own promise of a son and a future for that son, and, chastened, she returns to Abram and Sarai.

Fast forward a few years. God is back again, giving Abram another promise and making a formal covenant with him--- a binding promise for future generations. You will be the father of entire nations, God says as he renames him Abraham and renames his wife as Sarah. And to cap off this grand vision, God promises one more thing: another son and this one from your wife Sarah.

Abraham's response to all of this must have been one of the listeners' favorite parts of the story. Does he fall on his face praising God? Well, not exactly. He does fall on his face but he's laughing. All this buildup, all these incredible promises, and apparently it's just too much for poor Abraham. He loses it. He starts laughing and he laughs so hard that he falls down and he still keeps laughing. Abram says (to himself, according to the text): I'm too old for this and so is Sarah! She's way past the age to have a child! A little more diplomatic now, Abraham says to God: "Oh that Ishmael may live in your sight!" In other words, I already have a son and if you want to do all of this, then he's right here and I'm perfectly fine with it being him.

But once again, God is in charge of the story. He repeats it once more for Abraham: Sarah's son and not Hagar's. So the conversation ends and Abraham goes off and begins to honor his part of this new covenant by circumcising every male in his household. There is, by the way, no indication in this part of the story (nor in previous parts of the story) that Abraham has ever mentioned all of these promises to his wife Sarah. And as today's text shows us, he doesn't tell her anything about this promise either.

So we come to a day when three men arrive in Abraham's compound. They are brought to, or perhaps simply appear at, Abraham and Sarah's tent. And as guests, they are received by the patriarch of the clan and made welcome.

As would have been the custom in a male-dominated society, it is Abraham who comes out to meet the visitors while Sarah remains in the tent. Before we get too deeply into the details, we should note the textual difficulties in the story. Apparently there were two traditions associated with this story: in the first, God appears to Abraham in human form; in the second, three messengers, presumably angels, appear on God's behalf. In either case, Abraham reacts as a good host would: he greets his visitors, bowing to them, offering

water to drink and water to wash their feet. He also offers them food and rest under the trees near his tent. As a good host, he hurries into the tent to tell Sarah to start preparing bread and then goes to his servants, who slaughter a calf and prepare it for the guests. Then Abraham stands by as his guests rest and eat.

Then the conversation begins and an odd conversation it is. "Where is your wife, Sarah?" one of the men asks. Why are three strangers asking after Abraham's wife? Are they not here to have a conversation with Abraham? "She is there in the tent," Abraham answers, probably wondering himself. Then one of the visitors gets right to the point: "I will surely return to you in due season and your wife Sarah will have a son."

Hardly a bombshell for those listening to the story but imagine Sarah's reaction. For all these years, as God and Abraham have spoken together of descendants and nations and covenants, Sarah has apparently been unaware of these discussions and the ensuing promises. She is, by now, an elderly woman by any standards, long past the biological time in which she might have had children. But at this crucial point in the story, God, not Abraham, tells Sarah the good news.

Sarah has been standing at the entrance to the tent, observing and listening. And she hears what the visitor says. And she laughs. She laughs to herself, according to the story, not wanting to be found out eavesdropping. "My husband is old and I am old," she says to herself, and shall we again "have pleasure"---presumably, resume marital relations so that I might conceive?

Now God/the angel speaks up and asks Abraham (presumably Sarah is still inside the tent): why is your wife laughing? Is anything too wonderful for God?

And poor Sarah panics a little. She has been caught eavesdropping and what's more it has become obvious that these are no ordinary visitors and perhaps she has offended not only human men but messengers of God and thereby offended Deity. "I did not laugh," she says. "Yes, you did," says.....

Says somebody. Some versions of the Bible translate the ambiguous he as God. Has Sarah lied to God? And does this response---"yes, you did"-- indicate that God is angry with or disapproving of Sarah? Based upon these few verses, Sarah has frequently been judged for her laughter, and judged quite harshly at that.

Interestingly, Jewish rabbinic commentary on the story is some of the least judgmental. Rabbis whose study was codified over the centuries of the first millennium in collections such as the Mishnah and the Talmud wisely point out that Sarah and Abraham had essentially the same reaction to the news. One rabbinic story says that it was indeed God who posed the question and called out Sarah on her denial. Sarah, the rabbis say, made a true comment about Abraham's age which, nevertheless, would have hurt the old man's feelings. So God makes a comment that focuses on Sarah's laughter and NOT on her words about Abraham's age: "Abraham might have taken amiss what his wife had said about his advanced years and so precious is the peace between husband and wife that even the Holy One, Blessed be He, preserved that peace at the expense of the truth."

Many Christian commentators have not been as generous. One of the study Bibles on our congregational library shelves asks readers to think about Sarah's laughter in one of four categories: what kind of laugh was this? Was it disbelief---this is too much to understand and I just can't believe it's true? Was it ironic---now when my husband and I are both so old, now we're supposed to have a son? Was it joyful---this is such incredible news that I have no words? Or, asks the writer of the study notes, Was it sinful? Did Sarah's response indicate a fundamental lack of faith in God and his promises?

I'm sorry to say that many commentators have pitched the latter interpretation. Gerhard von Rad, a 20th century German scholar of the Old Testament, wrote what is still one of the most highly regarded commentaries on the book of Genesis. He characterizes Sarah's reaction to the announcement of her son as amusement, "she rather bluntly dismisses the matter as absurd." Her laughter is an "unbelieving and perhaps somewhat evil laugh." Sarah's quick denial he judges to be "an audacious lie."

Do we accept the probability of Herr Doctor Professor von Rad's interpretation or might we understand the story in another way that still comes from a close reading of the original text? Biblical scholar Tammi Schneider has written a book on the Genesis stories of Sarah. In "Sarah, Mother of Nations," she carefully examines the vocabulary and structure of these verses and concludes, both from the Hebrew and from the historical context of the story, that the speaker of that final "Oh, yes you did" is Abraham. As Schneider parses the text, Sarah is apprehensive that he and the guests have heard her laughter; afraid that she might have shamed her husband in front of his guests and perhaps also, then, afraid, of the consequences of her behavior after the guests have departed.

With this reading, perhaps we can look generously at this episode in Sarah's long life story. Her laughter may be a combination of many things --- joy, irony, disbelief may be one of those laughs that most of us have experienced in life that just comes from somewhere inside us when we hear something that amazes us. There is no clear indication in the biblical text, if we follow Schneider's reading, that the messengers were offended by Sarah's comments or her laughter. Astonished might be a better word: how can anyone doubt that God is able to accomplish his wonderful promises? The same God who saved Sarah from captivity in Egypt has now promised her the desire of her heart: a child, no matter her age.

I think those listening to this story long ago must have noticed something else. It's not everyone, in fact it's almost no-one, who receives a birth notice via an angel, or two or three. Sarah clearly plays an important role in God's promises to his people and if we understand that the angelic visitors aren't judging or condemning Sarah for her reaction, then the story is about the good news that they bring. Abraham's comment put aside, we should be laughing with Sarah and rejoicing with the angels: "Is anything too wonderful for God?"

In chapter 21 of Genesis, Sarah finally gives birth to her son Isaac. And she speaks these words: "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." No longer a silent laughter but one which can be shared without excuses and without doubt with anyone who hears. Sarah's story is not over where we leave her today. The question

of Isaac and Ishmael is unsettled, and that story is still provoking enough commentary for many more sermons. And why is Sarah absent from the story of the binding of Isaac? The rabbis had some interesting commentary on that question, but again that's another tale for another day.

Today let's leave Sarah and God laughing together over baby Isaac, laughing together over this splendid joke that only God could make possible.