

## “Laughter and God’s promise”

Genesis 18:1-15 (June 18, 2023)

Have you heard any good jokes recently? Most of us enjoy a good laugh now and again. This morning I want us to think about *laughter*. Yes laughter, here in a service of worship.

I remember, when I was a boy, my parents took us to visit two elderly aunts: Aunt Minnie and Aunt Pearl. My brother and I would sit quietly inside their darkened front room, while our parents sipped cups of tea.

There are two things that saved us on those Sunday afternoons. One was a jar of humbugs which might be offered to us. And the other was a book of jokes and riddles. Thankfully, one of those great aunts, had a keen sense of humour. And part of that ritual of visitation involved leafing through the book to find a joke that would make us laugh.



So, in the spirit of those memorable visits, I have some jokes to share with you. And because today is Father’s Day, they happen to be Father’s Day jokes. Are you ready?

Knock Knock... Who’s there? ... Gladys....Gladys who? ... Gladys Father’s Day.  
Why don’t they have Father’s Day sales? ... Because Fathers are priceless.  
What do you call a person who is not a dad, who makes Father’s Day jokes? ... A Faux Pa.

Those are groaners, aren’t they?

When you arrived in the auditorium, perhaps you saw a question on the screen: “When have you enjoyed laughter recently?” What came to your mind? Are there things you’ve been able to laugh about?

It’s good for your health, you know! Physically, mentally, maybe even spiritually. Laughter is the best medicine, says the book of Proverbs (17:22), and the Reader’s Digest.



There is laughter in our scripture reading:

Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent on a very hot day, when he looked out. And there standing in front of him, were three mysterious strangers. Abraham ran out to welcome them. He made quite a fuss. He wasn’t used to many visitors. But he bent over backwards to look after them. Running around here and there.

First to Sarah: “Quick,” he said, “make some bread for our company.” (Make bread quickly? That’s a joke in itself!) Then to his servant, he said: “Quick, take this calf and prepare it for our guests.”

And when he had the visitors rested and seated under the cooling shade of a tree, he stood by and watched as the meal was served.

So far it’s all been Abraham, scurrying around, trying to be hospitable. These visitors have had little to say.



But now they ask a question. “Where is your wife, Sarah?” Why would they want to know that? And how did they know her name? But these strangers know *many* things, as we shall see.

“She’s over there, in the tent,” answers Abraham.

And then, from this trio of visitors, came an astounding promise: “I will surely return to you in due season,” they said, “and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”



And now, if you are very still and quiet, not making any noise at all, you may just be able to hear it. Hear what, you ask? Well, the *laugh* of course. Didn’t I tell you there is laughter in this story?

It comes from over there. In the tent. Where Sarah has been listening in, thinking herself to be unnoticed. Until the promise was given. Then she couldn’t help herself. Sarah laughed.

What kind of laughter was it, I wonder? What did you hear?

Was it the laugh that comes when we listen to a joke? A straight-out, belly-shaking laugh? A bold uproarious chuckle that is contagious to our neighbours? Abraham and Sarah were old and wrinkled, well advanced in age. Sarah at 90, Abraham at 100, cradling a child and changing diapers. Really? That’s just crazy! The very thought of it would make you laugh.

Or maybe there was a tinge of bitterness in Sarah’s voice. Do you know what I mean? The kind of laugh that comes from disillusionment. A laugh that says, “Ha! I doubt it! There’s no way that will ever happen. Not in a thousand years.” A laugh of improbability. A laugh that turns any hint of joy away. “No way!” says Sarah. And her laugh betrays her.

Or maybe Sarah’s laugh was a laugh of brittle nervousness. When someone says something awkward, and no one knows how to react. There’s tension in the air. And that’s when we give a little tight-lipped sort of laugh that expresses our discomfort. Like we’re not really sure about this.



The LORD said to Abraham ... And notice now it is the *LORD* who speaks. (See, I told you there was something mysterious about these visitors. They speak on God’s behalf.) The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?’”

She’s been caught! Sneaky Sarah, hiding behind the curtain. Her laugh has given her away. These visitors must have elephant ears! They don’t miss a thing. She tries to deny it. “Who me? No, I didn’t laugh.” But she did. And everyone knows it.

We can’t really blame Sarah, can we? A few verses earlier, in Genesis chapter 17, God gave this same promise to Abraham. And he fell on his face and laughed. (Genesis 17:17) He could hardly believe it!

God told him he’d be the ancestor of a great multitude. For years they’d been trying, waiting. Nothing ever happened. Wanting to have children, they could not. If you’ve ever been there you know it’s a painful place to be.

Abraham would have settled for the child he had with Sarah’s slave-girl, Hagar. But that’s a whole other story. Yet God persists in God’s promise. God keeps giving it, despite our reluctance, our hesitation, our unwillingness to believe.



God gives wonderful promises to people of faith down through the ages.

The promise to Moses that powerful Pharaoh would let his people go. The promise to part the waters of the sea. The promise to provide for them in the wilderness.

When they found themselves as exiles in Babylon, God spoke of a day when the redeemed of the Lord would return to Zion with singing, and everlasting joy would be upon their heads. (Isaiah 51:11)

When Jesus drew a crowd of more than 5,000 hungry people, and all they could find was a child with a few small loaves and fishes ... he told his disciples to take the bread and pass it round. There was more than enough for everyone!

When they nailed Jesus to a cross, he turned to another convicted one, suffering right there beside him. "This day," he promised, "you'll be with me in paradise."

Such *promises*!



In our darkest days, God promises a love that will not let us go. God promises hope. New life. Nothing less than resurrection from the dead! It does sound a little crazy. Even laughable, you may say.

But please take note of this: When Sarah laughed, the messenger responded: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" 90 years old, with a shrivelled-up man, 10 years her senior. And they're supposed to have a baby? "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" What do you think?

Sometimes I wonder if we really do believe in the God of the Bible. Or if we merely pay God lip service. This is a God who promises life to young and old alike. A God who lends hope and purpose to our lives even when we think we're well past it. A God who calls us to be God's people, to have a part in God's plan for the renewal of the whole creation. And it doesn't matter how old you are, or how long you've been waiting for it, praying for it, longing for it to be.



We wondered earlier about Sarah – what her laughter might have meant. But listen: Here's a kind of laughter we didn't mention: What if her laughter is purely and simply the laughter of *joy*?

Do you know how many times scripture calls us to be joyful? "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!" (Psalm 98:4) "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4)

What if Sarah's laughter is a kind of holy rejoicing? What if, listening to God's promise, her spirit leaps within her? And a smile comes to her face as she ponders the delight of having children? Finally. Could it be so? A little squeal erupts from her 90 year old lips. Because she's tickled pink by the very thought of it.

Sarah laughs at the promise of God. Like maybe we all do, when we try to comprehend the wonder and enormity of what God has in store for our lives.



Does *God* have a sense of humour? Recruiting these old-age pensioners to be part of God's amazing plan? It strikes me that's just the sort of thing we might expect from this God who makes such wonderful promises.

Here's what I like to think – and I'm speculating now ... When those strangers finished their meal, and mounted their camels, and continued, well-fed, on their journey ... I like to think you could hear them, far down the road, chuckling among themselves, sharing a bit of a laugh as they travelled on.

“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” No, certainly not! Are God's promises given to *us*? Yes, most definitely! Does it matter what age we are? Not a bit!

God's love embraces every one of us. It will never let us go. And that is cause for great rejoicing! May it bring you joy today. Amen.