

“She laughed”
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Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
Proper 6A: Genesis 18.1-15, Romans 5.1-8, Matthew 9.35-10.8



“She Laughed” - Tracey Lind - Santa Fe, 2005

Good morning and welcome back! As many of you know, The Episcopal Church, along with other Christian denominations, draws our Sunday scripture readings from The Revised Common Lectionary - a three-year cycle fashioned around the seasons of the church year with the Gospel providing the anchor for the day.

However, during the long season after Pentecost, known as Ordinary Time, we are offered a rarely used alternative with semi-continuous readings from the Hebrew Scriptures that might not seem related to the Gospel but instead narrate the saga of our spiritual ancestors. This summer we will hear the formative stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Moses, Miriam, The Hebrew Midwives, and Aaron, along with Jesus, James the Fisherman and the cast of characters in the Gospel of Matthew.

But first, I want to wish Happy Father’s Day to all our dads, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, godfathers, and honorary fathers. You know who you are to the children in your lives. So....dear men, please don’t take offense at this sermon as I want to explore this morning’s text from the perspective of Sarah rather than Abraham.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all trace their ancestry to Abraham, the founding father of an extended family of faith. However, the stories of Abraham's wives - Sarah and Hagar, founding mothers, receive far less attention. My renowned seminary professor Phyllis Trible and her colleague Letty Russell point out, "This deficiency befits the patriarchal milieus in which these familial faiths developed and continue to flourish."¹ The absence of attention paid to our spiritual foremothers, especially Sarah and Hagar, begs the question of why and how women's voices have been and are still being ignored by the world's religions, and asks what difference would it make if we listened more carefully to those voices.

The tale of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and their respective sons, Isaac and Ishmael, also presents the question: does God show partiality, or are we all God's chosen? And if we are universally God's chosen people, how should we treat one another? This question gets to the heart of so many of today's beliefs, issues and conflicts.

The intertwined lives of Sarah, Hagar, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael were filled with ambiguity, promise, blessing, patience, pain, compromise, trade-offs, lies, deceit, politics, faith, joy, sorrow, tears, laughter and survival. Their descendants have continued the saga through the millennia - even today.

Sherry Blumberg, a teacher of the Hebrew Bible, sets Sarah's stage with this poem.

Leave my home?
My father, my mother?
Go with him
To this place unknown?

Follow this man
Who will cause me tears
Who may bring me laughter
Who says it is God's plan

So God, speak to me
That I may hear
Not just to him.
This is my plea!²

¹ Phyllis Trible & Letty Russell, "Unto the Thousandth Generation," *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*, p. 1

² Sherry Bloomberg, "Sarai," *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, p. 83

Sarah's story is both universal and particular. She was a daughter, wife and mother; an immigrant and a refugee; a pioneer and a princess. In the words of Professor Tribble, Sarah was "both tool and tyrant, the object of patriarchy, abused wife, afflicter of slaves, possessive mother, cruel matriarch, indispensable and disposable woman."³ That's a lot of hats for any one woman to wear.

At the beginning of our tale, Sarah (then known as Sarai) probably had a good life: complete with tents made of leather and felt, wool rugs, reliable kitchen fire pits, sturdy pottery, and beautiful jewelry. Her husband Abraham (then known as Abram) had flocks of sheep and camels, as well as silver and servants. With their health and each other, and their families behind them, Abram and Sarai, had a bright future, except for one fact revealed to the reader in a biblical genealogy: "Sarai was barren; she had no child."

One day, out of the blue, God spoke to Abram and convinced him that he should pull up stakes and head out for a foreign land where God promised, in spite of Sarai's infertility, to make him the father of a great nation, which would in turn be a blessing to all nations. So that's what Sarai and Abram did, and that's where their troubles started. In the words of Frederick Buechner, "Off they went in their station wagon with a U-haul behind and a handful of friends and relations who, if they didn't share Abraham's religious convictions, decided to hitch their wagons to his star."⁴

God's imperative required that they break with everything that identified a person and provided security in the ancient world. They had to leave their past and present and go forth to an unspecified place. The promise hinged on Sarai having a child, but she had a condition that basically negated the promise.

Things didn't go very well for this middle-aged couple. First, there was a famine in the land of Canaan, so they had to seek refuge in Egypt. There, out of fear and self-interest, Abraham betrayed his beautiful wife, passing her off as his sister, and allowing (maybe even encouraging) Pharaoh to make a play for her and take her into his own house. For a period of time, Abraham profited from this arrangement with increased wealth. Some legends suggest that, during their stay in Egypt, Sarai acquired Hagar as her servant. Eventually, Pharaoh learned of Sarai's real identity and booted them out of the country.

Once again, homeless and on the road, but now with a lot more livestock, they met up with Abram's brother-in-law Lot and had to share a small piece of land near Bethel, not far from where they had started out.

There Sarai acknowledged that she was "barren." Don't you just hate that word? The word "barren" means unfruitful, unproductive and sterile. To me, it sounds like a God-forsaken place where nothing grows. Maybe that's what it feels like when you really want to have a child, and you learn that you can't get pregnant. So much of a woman's identity and worth has always focused on motherhood. As we are witnessing in today's battle over abortion, reproductive choice has been and still is considered by many to be fair game in the socio-politico-religious landscape, and the female reproductive system is often considered the most defining essence of womanhood, something that many men believe they have a right to control.

³ Tribble, p. 59

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy and Fairy Tale*

In the book of Genesis, having a child was also an important part of the divine promise and bargain that God initially made with Abram. Sarai, realizing her predicament, believed that “God had prevented [her] from bearing children.” (Gen 16.2) So she took matters into her own hands and offered Abram her slave-girl Hagar so that he might have a descendant and God’s promise be fulfilled. “Go then into, [in other words, have intercourse] with my maid. Perhaps, I shall be built up from her,” said Sarai to Abram. (Gen 16.2)

Sarai successfully persuaded Abram to take Hagar as a surrogate mother, and in doing so, complicated her own marriage by making Hagar both a concubine and second wife. Here the story gets really tangled and thorny, but we’ll save that for next Sunday when we hear this formative story from Hagar’s perspective.

Decades pass, and we meet the renamed Sarah and Abraham as an old couple in their nineties living by the Oaks of Mamre in Hebron - still waiting on God’s renewed promise that Sarah herself would be blessed with a son. A few years earlier, God had told Abraham that Sarah, whose name in Hebrew means “princess,” would become “nations” and give birth to a “royal people.” (Gen 17.16). God was adamant that only Sarah could bear the legitimate heir. It’s starting to sound like an episode from the Netflix series *Bridgerton*. When God spoke these words, Abraham laughed to himself, thinking this is impossible, especially now that Sarah was no longer “after the manner of women,” in other words, postmenopausal. (Gen 18.11)

In this today’s passage from the 18th chapter of Genesis, three men, messengers (or angels) of God, showed up at their home, and Abraham quickly offered them hospitality. “Sit down and relax; let me wash your feet and get you some food to eat.” Then, he called to Sarah who was in her tent, “Quick, make these strangers a meal.”

As they were eating, the strangers asked, “Where is your wife Sarah?” “In her tent,” Abraham responded. Then one said, “I will return this time next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a child.”

This has to be one of the most comical predictions in all of scripture. I can imagine Mrs. Maisel doing this schtick. Abraham is ninety-nine and Sarah is ninety, and they are finally going to have a baby. Sarah, eavesdropping from her tent, laughed out loud, thinking: “Now that I am withered, will I have pleasure, with my lord so old!” (Gen 18.12)

When the messenger asked why Sarah had laughed, she denied it because according to the text, “She was afraid.” What did Sarah have to fear? Was she afraid of the strangers in her home? Was she afraid of being pregnant and having a child at the age of ninety? Was she afraid of Abraham; afterall, he hadn’t been a very good husband. Or, was Sarah afraid to believe such good, but seemingly implausible news?

Scripture tells us that God “remembered” Sarah and did for her as was promised. *Zakar*, the Hebrew word for “remember” is a word we shouldn’t forget. It doesn’t mean merely to rummage through our brains till we find what we’re looking for. No, biblical remembrance is about using our bodies and minds to act in ways that reconnect us with another. When God remembers us, God reconnects with us. When we remember God or another person, we reconnect, if not in body, then in spirit. That’s why remembering is actually a powerful form of prayer, and applies even to the Holy One. The word *zakar* was first used in reference to God after the flood when God remembered Noah and all those animals in the ark by drying the earth with wind and promising to never do that again.

God made promises to Abraham but remembered Sarah. Nine months later, after a second experience of her husband passing her off as his sister to yet another man, King Abimelech, Sarah had a son and they named him Isaac, which in Hebrew means "He laughs."

At his circumcision, Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." Earlier in the story, her laughter was private, but now it embraced everyone who heard the news. "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet, I have borne him a son in his old age." (Gen 21.6) Note that Abraham's age seems to be more of a miracle to Sarah than her own.

The story once again got complicated over the word "laughter" when Sarah heard Ishmael, the son of Hagar, laughing at or with her son Isaac. But, we'll save that story for next week as well.

Suffice it to say, living to the ripe old age of one hundred twenty-seven years, Sarah did, in fact, become the mother of a nation, the first matriarch of our faith. Over the course of the years to follow, there would be many occasions of sadness, grief and terror accompanied by tears. She would still have to face a world where God would be seen through a glass darkly, (especially, when Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac). But perhaps, the memory of that comical day by the Oaks of Mamre, and the son who was named for laughing, would keep her going strong till the end of her long life.

Isn't that how it often is. If we don't laugh, we will cry. And sometimes, we laugh so hard that we cry. And sometimes we laugh as we cry. Tears of joy and tears of grief are really intermingled in this crazy life.

In the letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes that, "Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." (Romans 5.3-5). I would add that laughter keeps us going when the going gets tough. My friends, let us remember Sarah and her husband Abraham who were "strangers and foreigners on the earth...seeking a homeland and desiring a better country." (Hebrews 11.13-16). And, as we desire a better country to call home, like Sarah, let us work for it with both faith and laughter.