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Woodhaven Presbyterian Church  
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10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time: Genesis 12:1-9; 21:1-7

### **Tracing the Laughter**

I know a little blonde boy who does not like it one bit when people laugh at him. Even if he is purposefully trying to make you laugh, he gets upset when he succeeds. We have tried to explain that our laughter is joyful and that it is because he is so sweet. But all he can hear is the sound of someone laughing at him. We guess it makes him feel discounted and demeaned. He does not have the words yet to explain it himself. All he knows is how it feels.

Likewise, we are not exactly sure what to make of Sarah's laughter in the first Genesis reading. We do not know if it was meant to be joyful or demeaning. We do know that she kept her laughter to herself. Perhaps she did not want to offend the visitors, who, like the little blonde boy, might not appreciate being laughed at. And so we can deduce, then, that her laugh was more of a scoff, more of a sarcastic chuckle, than an outright, share-it-with-the-world joyful guffaw.

And really, we can understand why Sarah might be feeling a bit sarcastic, can't we? Perhaps we ought to back up a bit in her story. As you remember from last week, when Sarai (at that time) and Abram were living in Haran, Abram received word from God that he, Sarai, and their entire household needed to go. Go from his father's land. Go from the familiar. Go from the life they had always known. Go and follow God's call to a new land, a new familiar and a new beginning.

And so he and Sarai did just that. They packed up everything and went. Perhaps they laughed as they packed their stuff up—the nervous giggles that can come when you know that if you don't laugh, you will certainly cry. But our Scripture does not tell us anything about their dialogue as they responded to this sudden and unexpected call on their lives.

But even if they had laughed a bit along the way, the laughter quickly ceased when they arrived in Egypt. Abram and Sarai traveled through Egypt as a way to avoid a famine. But they knew going in that it was a dangerous move. Why? Because of the Pharaoh. Abram was so scared of the Pharaoh that he put Sarai at risk by claiming she was his sister. He thought that if the Pharaoh knew she was his wife, that Pharaoh would kill him to get to her. Well, as it turned out, the Pharaoh thought nothing about taking Sarai into his own home, loading Abram up with flocks, donkeys, camels, and slaves as payment for the supposed sister.

It seems that just as quickly as God's promise of heirs came to Abram and Sarai, it just as quickly escaped their minds. For this one act of dishonesty put the promise at risk. We all know what happens when the Pharaoh takes a woman into his home. And yet, our text tells us that God, probably not laughing one bit, intervened. Pharaoh discovered Sarai's true identity and sent her away with her family, their stuff in hand.

I imagine Sarai and Abram both laughed and cried with relief as they hightailed it out of Egypt. They had come really close to messing it all up. Perhaps they rededicated themselves to trusting in the one who had called them into this mess. If they had been at a revival and "Just as I Am" started playing on the organ, my guess is that both of them would have come down the center aisle. And yet, their laughter of relief and their renewed dedication to trust probably ended as quickly as it bubbled up. For they were still traveling. They were still old. And they still did not have their God-promised heir.

By this point, they were so wealthy that the land could not sustain Abram and Sarai's household, as well as the household of their nephew Lot. And so, Lot left to settle in Jordan. And Abram and Sarai settled in Canaan.

And there, God once again brought the laughter of hope as God promised to give their descendants all the land that they could see. And yet, after a while, even with the promise still looming on the horizon, the laughter faded again. They were now settled. But they were still old. And they still did not have their God-promised heir.

By this point, laughter was the furthest thing on Sarai's mind. She was sick of the whole situation. She was sick of waiting for this promise. She was sick of getting her hopes up, letting the joy and laughter build, only to have it stall out and disappear. And so, like Abram did in Egypt, Sarai decided to take matters in her own hands. In a practice that was common yet still incredibly exploitive, Sarai convinced Abram to get their servant, Hagar, pregnant. If God would not act when Sarai wanted God to act, then God was leaving her no choice. She would have to make good on the promise herself.

And Abram did as Sarai encouraged and soon, Hagar was indeed pregnant. And yet, any joyful laughter that Hagar might have felt at the news stood in stark contrast to the scornful laughter that Sarai began to feel. She realized that this was not her best move and she was being displaced in her own household. As a result of her jealousy, she treated Hagar so horribly that Hagar, child in womb, ran away. And yet, God saw Hagar and made promises to the child in her womb, too. So Hagar returned. But the laughter in the household was gone. Too much had happened. Too much had gone terribly awry. By that point, Abram and Sarai didn't even bother with rededicating themselves to trusting the promise anymore. Too much backsliding. Maybe they figured they were lost causes.

And in the middle of what I imagine to be a laughter-free home, Ishmael was born. And Abram, who was 87, surely must have smiled and laughed at the birth of his first son. Surely Hagar, when she saw that sweet face, must have smiled and laughed even knowing how she was used for his conception. And Ishmael, with the innocence of a child, surely laughed and played and lived with joyful mirth. But Sarai? Well, I don't hear Sarai laughing. Crying, perhaps. Angry with herself, maybe. But laughing? I doubt it.

Thirteen years passed and once again, God came calling. This time, God came not only to reaffirm that God would indeed do as God promised way back when, but to even change their names in the hopes that this would signal a new beginning for them. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. God gave both of them a fresh start, a new hope, and a renewed covenant. And, once again, God explicitly told Abraham that Sarah would have their long-promised, long-awaited child. But when 99 year old Abraham heard that promise again, he could not help himself. He literally fell on his face with unbelievable laughter. Perhaps he laughed out of pent-up disbelief and frustration. Perhaps waiting all those years just reached the boiling point and he could no longer contain himself.

"Are you kidding me?" he replied back to God. "Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Can Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child?" Abraham laughed so hard that his stomach hurt and his face ached. And God, well, God just waited for the laughter of disbelief to subside. And then God replied, straight-faced, "Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac, which means he laughs." Clever name.

We have no idea if Abraham ever told Sarah about that one particular meeting. If he did, then you might guess that she, too, found herself doubled over in the laughter of disbelief. If he did not, if all Abraham told her was that she had a new name, then it makes her reaction in today's story make even better sense. It was hot in the afternoon when the three strangers arrived at their tents. Abraham, showing excellent Middle-Eastern hospitality, pulled out all the stops. Cakes, a calf, curds and milk. He did not keep anything from them. And as the visitors ate, one of them asked about Sarah's whereabouts. "She is in the tent," Abraham said. And, that was true. But Sarah was at the entrance of the tent, just out of view, determined to hear the conversation so she might be able to figure out who they were and why they had come.

And it was while standing there that she heard those words, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” For how many years now had she heard those words? How many years had passed since that initial promise? She could not help but scoff in disbelief. She could not help but laugh sarcastically to herself. “Yeah, sure,” she thought. “I have heard that one before.” She just shook her head and laughed. It was either that or cry in despair. And she had no more tears.

Her tears had dried up after 13 years of watching Ishmael and his mother laugh and play and enjoy what Sarah had once thought she would have for herself. She knew God had made a promise. And she wanted to believe that God would follow-through. And yet, she was done with the laughing that came with imagining a child of her own. All that was left was the bitter laughter of disappointment.

But, Sarah did not want to embarrass the visitors or show disrespect, so she kept it all to herself. And so you can imagine how terrified she was to hear one of them ask why she was laughing. How did he know that? Her bitter laughter was cut off at the knees. She quickly grew stone-faced. “I did not laugh,” she insisted, first to herself. She did not want to be in some kind of trouble. She did not know who these visitors really were.

The stranger continued, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Is anything beyond what God can do? I shall return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” “I did not laugh,” Sarah insisted, this time, out loud. “Yes you did Sarah,” the visitor said gently. “Oh yes, you did laugh.” And with that gentle reprimand, the visitors left. And Sarah must have gone back into the tent and played the scene over again and again in her mind. “How did he know,” she must have thought. And, once again, all laughter left her spirit. This time, however, it was not bitterness that killed her laughter. It was fear. And, once again, the only laughter heard in the household of Abraham and Sarah was from the mouths of Ishmael and Hagar.

But then, things began to change for Abraham and Sarah. Sarah began feeling aches and pains she had never felt before. She began to see her body change in ways she did not understand and had never experienced. And during those days, those long nine months, she laughed a lot, simply out of pure fear and anxiety. Abraham never cracked a smile. He did not believe what he was seeing with his own eyes. Hagar laughed less and less too, for she had a feeling what was going to happen when God fulfilled God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah. Ishmael found it all very exciting and his laughter grew stronger.

And after nine terrifying months, it happened. After all that time, God finally followed-through with what God had promised back in Haran. After all that time, Sarah finally gave birth. She gave birth to Isaac, to her son named after laughter. And when her waters broke, so did all those years of frustration and doubt and bitterness. And as her son named after laughter was born into the world, the laughter of pure joy, delight, and trust in promise-fulfilled was reborn in her soul.

And Sarah just laughed and laughed and laughed. She saw Isaac’s little beat-up, wrinkled face and laughed until her eyes ran with tears. And Abraham, once he got over the shock, found himself completely overcome with the laughter. He laughed and laughed and laughed until his stomach hurt and his face ached. Even Hagar could not help but laugh. She knew it all spelled trouble for her, but she could not help but catch the joy that was overflowing in that home due to promise fulfilled. And Ishmael joined in too, his child-laughter full of innocence. And even when baby Isaac cried with the shock over being born, all any of them could do was hold him and laugh. And that night, with stars in their eyes, they laughed themselves to sleep.

And my guess is that the God of fulfilled promises, inexhaustible forgiveness, and renewed covenants probably joined in the laughter. And for a while on that day, a great roar of global laughter was heard far and wide. And in response, God’s creation began groaning with labor pains waiting for the day when the laughter of joy, delight and trust in promise-fulfilled will be the only sound reverberating throughout the universe.