

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 18:1-15

Pew Bible, O.T. pg. 13

¹The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. ⁹They said to him, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." ¹⁰Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?" ¹³The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. The Lord said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Genesis 18:1-15

06/21/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"The Last Laugh"

Rev. Amy Terhune

It is Father's Day, and I think it appropriate to begin by saying thank-you to all the men out there—be they fathers, grandfathers, uncles, friends, neighbors, coaches, mentors, or teachers—who have made an impact in the life of a child. This day is for you. I also am aware that parenting is probably the most difficult and challenging job I've ever had, and I am grateful that I never had to try to manage it alone. When my girls were young, I was working full time and Brad was home as full-time dad for several years. He was the one who dealt with the day-to-day realities of emotional meltdowns, homework, laundry, meals, schedules, and attitudes. He was the one who took Catharine to be fitted for her first pair of pointe shoes. And he was the one who taught them to drive because both girls complained that I spent too much time clutching the door handle and hissing through my teeth. I recall any number of times when I would show up for evening meetings at church without the whole crew in tow, and someone would invariably say to me, "Oh, is Brad home babysitting?" I had a standard response: "No, he's home parenting". Sheesh! It's not easy being a dad.

Conan O'Brien tells a wonderful story about going Daddy Day at his daughter's preschool back when he was still living in New York City a few decades back at this point. This was the day that all the kids brought their dads to preschool with them. Conan had made arrangements—he went in early that day, his staff came in early that day. They got everything set for the show so that Conan could leave for a couple of hours in the middle of the afternoon to go to Daddy Day and be back for showtime.

Well, he's in a cab on the way to the preschool, and traffic is just horrendous. They're just sitting there, not moving, and Conan realizes that he's going to be late for Daddy Day if he stays in the

cab. The preschool is about 14 or 15 blocks away, so he paid the cab driver, got out of the car, and headed to the preschool on foot.

Now keep in mind, even in New York City, a man like Conan O'Brien is somewhat recognizable. He's a little more than six feet tall with red hair.

Anyway, it just so happened that this short, wiry little man saw him get out of the cab and must have thought to himself, 'here's my chance!' He had written a movie script—a comedy—and he wanted Conan O'Brien to read it and tell him what he thought. People will do that to celebrities, you know. Here, read this, tell me if it's funny.

The problem was that the city was congested, chaotic, and loud, and Conan was focused on getting to his daughter's Daddy Day, so he didn't hear this man calling to him. He checked his watch and realized he had about five minutes to get to Daddy Day, so Conan O'Brien started to run down the street to try to get there on time. Meanwhile, this little man wasn't going to miss this opportunity, and so he picked up the pace and went running after him with this script. Finally, the guy catches up with Conan just outside the preschool, hands Conan the script. Conan says 'Yeah, okay, sure, I'll read it,' and goes on in to the preschool, at which point, it occurs to him that half the City of New York just saw a six-foot-tall, red-headed, very recognizable Conan O'Brien running for his life down the street with a little, wiry man chasing him yelling 'I won't hurt you!'

The audience laughed—it's not hard to picture the scenario in one's mind; it's funny. But I'll tell you what impresses me. Conan O'Brien—star of a late-night talk show, funny guy, writer for some of the best comedy on television—Conan O'Brien ran 14 or 15 blocks through the city of New York because getting to Daddy Day on time was important to him. He asked his crew to rearrange their schedules for it. That tells me about his priorities and his values

If we turn to our scripture lesson for this morning, we meet a couple equally devoted to their priorities – devotion to God and one another. Decades came and went, but no children were born to them. Life, for Abraham and Sarah, may have followed God's plans, but without question, it looked nothing like the plans they made for themselves when they first married all those many years ago. King Duncan points out that, "in a time when many couples are choosing not to have children, we simply cannot appreciate the humiliation that Sarah felt at being barren. Her condition was not looked upon as a gynecological problem in that pre-scientific time. Her condition was viewed as a sign that she was out of favor with God. "Sarah was an embarrassment to her husband, Abraham. She had failed in her primary function as a wife—to bear him an heir. There were surely nights when she cried herself to sleep. "What is the matter with me?" she asked herself. "Why am I being punished like this?" [¶] from "Sarah Laughed" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

At that time in history, a man could justifiably dismiss his wife if she didn't bear him a child in seven years. The fact that Abraham didn't do that indicates both his integrity as a man and his love for Sarah. We would expect no less from the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But this isn't simply a story of our past and our origins. This is not merely the record of how the ancient Israelites understood their place in God's plan or the role of Abraham in the context of building a nation. It offers valuable insight for today.

First, and I can't stress this enough, God wants followers who are highly skeptical of the word 'impossible'. 12,000 BC or 2000 AD—it doesn't matter. There are times when God asks us to think beyond the limits of what we deem possible. Sarah laughs at the idea of a pregnancy, but she's not alone. Just one chapter previous, in Genesis 17, God comes to Abraham with the promise that he will be a father of nations and kings and that Sarah will bear a son. Verse 17 of chapter 17 reads like this: Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is 90, bear a child? O God, may Ishmael find favor in your sight."

He doesn't see how it could possibly come to be. Sarah doesn't either. Both laugh, incredulously and in disbelief: 'yeah, right!' And you would not believe how many commentators fall into the same trap. One actually suggested that Sarah was probably 90 seasons old, which, if there are two seasons in Israel, would put her in her mid-40s. It's late enough for her to be going through menopause, but a pregnancy at that age would not be inconceivable (no pun intended). Really? Come on, now! The whole point of this story is that it's impossible! It's ludicrous! It's beyond rational explanation. The point is to communicate time and time again, that we profess faith in a God who defies limits. This is a God who parts the waters, makes the lame to walk, calms the storms, and walks alive out of a tomb. This is about believing in something that, by all accounts, can never be.

One of the marks of a Jesus-sized dream, according to Rebekah Simon-Peter, is that the dream expands assumptions about what is possible. Never write things off as impossible – not things that are meaningful, that would improve God's world for all God's people. The Spirit has a way of getting in the mix and making things happen that we'd have never thought possible. The old adage is that Seeing is Believing. But some dreams must be believed to be seen. This is a great truth of human existence.

The Israelites understood that their very existence—every last one of them—was due entirely to the intervention of God, who made the 'impossible' possible. This is not just about a baby. It could be about ending the extinction of species in the Amazon. It could be about peace in the middle east. It could be about a cure for Alzheimer's or Cancer. It could be about civility and selfless service taking over politics and economics. It could be about anything that instinctively stirs up in us this gut reaction that goes, "Ha! Yeah right! Never gonna happen!" If we don't believe, it won't! As outrageous, outlandish, and outright maddening as it is, God works through us 99% of the time. If this teaches us anything, let it teach us to back off on the use of the word impossible. To be sure, there are plenty of things I believe will happen that I will not live to see. There are many couples out there wishing to have children who can't; plenty of families struggling to survive wars and bombings who won't; plenty of people praying for answers and cures who don't receive them. And the pain in those circumstances is sometimes too heavy to bear. Scripture does not make light of the pain all around us. But it does challenge us to see beyond it. The scriptural call is to both compassion and hope—to both walk with one another in suffering, and to imagine ways to alleviate suffering. I remain convinced of the ingenuity, creativity, and essential goodness of humanity. And I believe God is working with and through the most unlikely people and circumstances. I believe in the power of hope when everyone else wants us to believe hope is foolish and futile. The point is that impossible things can and will happen, and more frequently than we think, do happen already.

The second lesson is simple and somewhat cliché, but I'll say it anyway. The simple truth is that he (or she) who laughs, lasts. I'm not sure where the puritans got the idea that smiling was a sin, children who play are derelict, and jokes are an affront to God. But it's an image of Christianity that continues to pervade some quarters of our culture. Christians are serious. We're party-poopers. We're rigid and uptight and intolerant of any funny business. And all this, when laughter is a gift from God—quite possibly the best coping mechanism God has put in our arsenal.

Of course, Abraham and Sarah are not the only barren couple well advanced in years who receive news of a coming pregnancy. Several thousand years later, God shows up again, this time to a priest named Zachariah in the very first chapter of Luke's gospel. Zachariah and Elizabeth will become the parents of John the Baptist, a great prophet. But do you remember what happens when God tells Zachariah the good news? Like Abraham and Sarah, he is bowled over by the announcement. But he doesn't learn from the patriarch. Abraham fell down laughing, but Zachariah got defensive. His mind is closed to the possibility right from the start. How do I know God's going to do what you're telling me? Prove it. Explain it. Substantiate it. And God says, "Oh shut up!" and Zachariah is struck dumb. He's

not allowed to talk for nine months! Abraham and Sarah laugh. Albeit, there's a degree of incredulity in the laugh, but even so, it's a laugh and God can work with that. You see, if there's no laughter, the fear and the weight of one's doubts come crashing down. God gets stymied. But in every laugh, no matter how startled, there is a granule of acceptance, where possibility can take hold and grow. No matter how dubious one might be, laughter indicates an ability to get around fear.

We all know people who, when faced with change, trouble, stress, or suffering, respond as Zachariah did—with fear, distrust, and even anger. And we know people who, when faced with those same issues, find a way experience joy anyway. We all know which, of those kinds of people, survive longer, cope better, bounce back faster, or experience better quality of the time they're given.

Rev. Richard Fairchild tells a wonderful story about a father who showed his children how see life through eyes more like Abraham's and less like Zachariah's: A young boy watched as his father walked into the living room. The boy noticed that his younger brother, John, began to cower slightly as his father entered. The older boy sensed that John had done something wrong. Then he saw from a distance what his brother had done. The younger boy had opened his father's brand-new leather hymnal and scribbled all over the first page with a pen.

Staring at their father fearfully, both brothers awaited John's punishment. Their father picked up his prized hymnal, looked at it carefully and then sat down, without saying a word, and looked at that page for a long minute. Then, instead of scolding, or yelling, his father took the pen from the little boy's hand, and then wrote in the book himself, alongside the scribbles that John had made. Here is what that father wrote: "John's work, 1959, age 2. How many times have I looked into your beautiful face and into your warm, alert eyes looking up at me and thanked God for the one who has now scribbled in my new hymnal. You have made the book sacred, as have your brother and sister to so much of my life."

"Wow," thought the older brother, "This is punishment?" The author of the story, now an adult, goes on to say how that hymnal became a treasured family possession, how it was tangible proof that their parents loved them, how it taught the lesson that what really matters is people, not objects; patience, not judgment; love, not anger. [Richard Fairchild, adapted by King Duncan, illustrations for Father's Day, www.Sermons.com.]

Sarah laughed. She laughed at God. She laughed out of incredulity and disbelief. But God seized it as a teachable moment. Why do you laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? And she denied it, for fear of punishment. I didn't laugh. But God didn't take it that way. Oh yes you did, said God, and you will laugh again. You will laugh with me at the joy of this incredible birth. The child born to Sarah was named Isaac, which means 'laughter'. He was not named so because Sarah laughed, but because God looked at Abraham and Sarah's expanding awareness of what was possible, their growing wonder at what was happening, their increasing devotion to a vision they would never live to see all the way to fruition, and God laughed. With delight, with pride—"Ah yes, they get it! They did it!" And whenever we likewise prove possible what everyone said was impossible and move around fear to new possibilities, God still laughs. With delight, with pride—"Ah yes, they get it! They did it!" Because God always gets the last laugh. Thanks be to God. Amen.