

Awaiting the Manger: Sarah
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
Dec. 2, 2018 – AM Sermon
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Genesis 18:1-15

Don't blame Sarah for laughing. Most of us would have done the same. She's standing there at the opening of her tent, cleaning up for her husband and his guests. Over the clatter of the dishes, she can hear the talk of the men just outside the tent flap. One of the guests declares: *"I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife shall have a son!"* And, almost involuntarily, Sarah laughs. Not really a laugh, more a snort or a guffaw. "Hah!! Pfft!" A cynical little sound. It's the sound of air coming out her tires. It's the sound of hope leaving her body.

Don't blame her. Sarah's life had been hard. Sarah's life had not gone the way she thought it would. She'd done everything the Lord had asked her to do. She'd done everything her husband had asked her to do. She'd done it all for this child God had promised. Her mind ran through the list of the sacrifices. She'd left their cozy home and her friends in Ur in exchange for life in a tent. In Egypt, to save his own skin, Abram made her pretend to be his sister. She had to put up with all the unwanted advances of the Egyptian men. When she saw Abram's disappointment at not having children, she'd given him her maidservant Hagar, and then she suffered the humiliation of seeing Hagar get pregnant right away. When Abram insisted on changing his name to Abraham (which meant the Father of many) she went along with it, even though every time she said his name it felt like a cruel joke. For more than 20 years Sarah had done all this because the Lord said she'd have descendants like the stars. She thought that by now her dinner table would be filled with children. She thought she might even have a grandchild or two to bounce on her knee. Now here she was, an old woman, in a tent, in the desert, serving food to these strangers.

Although we might not want to blame Sarah for laughing, her laugh does show the state of her heart. Here's an important question for this passage. When she laughs in her tent, does Sarah still have faith? Does Sarah still believe the promise? Is Sarah actually expecting God to do something? It doesn't seem like it. She's given up on children. It's like she believes God exists, but because of her disappointments, she doesn't expect his existence to make any difference in her daily life. Her faith is on empty.

That's what happens when life doesn't go the way you expected. That's especially what happens when life doesn't seem to go the way God promises. It takes the air out of your tires; it squeezes the hope out of you. You prayerfully started a business and you gave your heart and soul to it. It was something you believed in and you gave everything. But it just sputtered along, and finally it died and now you have nothing but grey hair and debt. On your wedding day you and your wife looked each other in the eye and said, "Till death do us part!" You gave your marriage 20 years, but then it crashed and burned and now you're alone in an apartment. You and your husband loved to talk about the things you would do when you retired. You worked really hard, gave up all sorts of things and said, when we retire we'll take that trip together. But now he has dementia and the only trips you're taking are to the doctor's office. Standing at her tent flap Sarah laughs. And it's the laughter of a billion disappointed people whose lives just didn't go the way they wanted.

So, there is heavy disappointment in our story. But I think you know the disappointment does not last. I think you know how this story ends. God shows up. Right when Sarah has given up, God shows up. The Lord delivers on the promise. A year from now, Sarah will be making appointments with her obstetrician. A year from now Sarah and Abraham will be tottering into birthing classes beside the young moms, all of them practicing their breathing patterns together. A year from now Sarah will laugh again, only this time it won't be a cynical sound; this time it will be the laughter joy and hope and fulfillment. A year from now Sarah will be holding her son Isaac. His name mean he laughs. Because "God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me!"

So God shows up and God keeps his promises and there are two things wonderful about that. It's wonderful because it shows us that God keeps his promises and, in the midst of our disappointments, in the middle of all our advent waiting, we need to know that.

But it's also wonderful because God shows up without any help from Sarah. Remember, it's pretty clear that Sarah doesn't believe the promises anymore. She probably believes in God, but she no longer believes that God will do anything for her. "After I am worn out and my lord is old, shall I still have this pleasure." Her faith is on empty. But God shows up anyway! The Lord doesn't need Sarah's faith to keep his promises. The Lord shows up even though Sarah's stopped hoping. God doesn't need Sarah's faith to make salvation happen.

This is totally God's M.O. by the way. He is, as Paul puts it in Romans 4:17, "*the God who brings life from the dead and calls into being things that were not.*" That's how he did it at creation. God brought it into being out of nothing. Creation Ex Nihilo. You know that doctrine? When God created he didn't need anything from us. That's how God did it in the incarnation. It happens through a virgin birth. Did God need anything from Mary to bring his Son? He didn't need anything from us to bring his salvation. That's how God did it on Easter morning. Did any of the disciples get up on Easter Sunday expecting Jesus to be alive? Did anyone expect it? No. But Jesus rose anyway. God didn't need anything from us to bring his salvation. God doesn't need the faith of any of us to accomplish his purposes. The faith and life of our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient.

This is so comforting! I have been with many Christian people as they approach death and I can tell you that people do that with a variety of levels of faith. Some leave this life with hymns on their lips and a shine in their eyes. They are eager to meet the Lord. Many go with a mix of faith and uncertainty. They cling to their faith but feel scared about this unknown journey. Some go to the grave terrified. Some can't seem to summon up any hope or faith at the end. I remember meeting with a man who was dying of cancer. He'd fought it with everything he had, and now he was losing. With his voice shaking he said he confessed to me that he couldn't feel God's presence, he couldn't feel any traces of faith, all the promises that he had been reciting his whole life seemed hollow. He started to cry, and he cried so hard he shook. I was a younger minister then. I didn't know what to say. I think I put my hand on his arm and held it there. I tried to reassure him of God's love. I said a prayer. But when I left he was still distraught. If I could do it again, I would tell him the story of Sarah. I would have reminded him of this woman scoffing in her tent, this woman who had also lost her feeling for God's promises, this woman who had stopped believing in happy endings; this woman who, nevertheless, to her great surprise found out that it was *all true!* I think he's figured that out by now. By now, his tears are gone. I think he's laughing the same laugh Sarah laughed when she held Isaac in her arms.

Of course, God may not *need* our faith to work his salvation, but he definitely prefers it. He prefers it for his own sake, but he especially prefers it for our sake. It's better for us if we

walk in hope. There's a phrase in our text which reminds us of that point. The Lord challenges Sarah's cynicism by saying "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" Does that remind you of another Bible passage? Years later, there will be another encounter between an angel and a woman. It's another encounter that announces an impossible birth. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her that she will give birth to a child. Do you remember what the angel adds to that announcement? "For nothing is impossible with God." Only when Mary hears the promise, she does not laugh. When Mary hears the promise her reaction is very different from Sarah. Mary says: "*I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said.*"

Mary's response is the response of faith and hope and it is rightly celebrated as a better response than the one given by poor Sarah. It's celebrated because it gets at the heart of faith. It's celebrated because it shows what it takes to be joyful people of God in a world of disappointments. People of faith are people who stand in the storm but keep their eyes on Jesus. People of faith are people who walk in the darkness but who sing of the light. People of faith are surrounded by disappointment, but keep walking in hope. God may be able to work salvation without us, but how much better for us if we take his hand and let him lead us through the darkness and up to the light. In one of his books, Lew Smedes tells the story of Etty Hillesum. Etty was a Dutch Jew who lived in Amsterdam during World War Two. Rather than fleeing the city or hiding from the Germans, she chose to live openly and defiantly. During the war she began to keep a diary of her experience and these diaries chronicled her conversion to Christianity. She reads the gospels and she falls in love with Jesus.

As the war presses on, it becomes more and more clear that she is doomed. Her Jewish friends are being taken to camps and none of them are returning. She knows death is coming (she dies in Auschwitz in 1943), but somehow, in the middle of that horror, something lives in her:

"From all sides the destruction creeps up on us and soon the ring will be closed, and no one will come to our aid...But I don't feel I am in anyone's clutches: I feel safe in God's arms...and whether I am sitting at my beloved oak desk in the Jewish district or in a labor camp under SS guards...I shall feel safe in God's arms. For once you have begun to walk with God you need only keep on walking with him and all of life becomes one long stroll."

God can work salvation without you, but how much better to walk with him in hope. How much better for us if we take his hand and let him lead us through the darkness and up to the light. How much better to live in hope.

You did something hopeful today; you came here. In the face of your disappointments, in the face of all your busyness, even though you were tired, you came to this place, and you opened your mouth and you sang a song of hope. Nice job! May this be the beginning of a week full of hopeful acts for you! Know that your hope is well founded. Because Sarah's baby is the ancestor of Mary's child. And Mary's child is our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who died for us. The one who will lead us to the light. The one who will wipe away our tears. The one who will teach us how to laugh.

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