

Sarah Laughed

Sunday 14 June 2020 – Second after Pentecost

I've found myself waxing nostalgic as of late. I was thinking about when this whole "Call to the Ministry" thing happened. I was in my 30's and attending St. James Anglican Church in Cambridge, pardon me, Hespeler, Ontario. I was working with The Reverend George Ferris and had been talking to him about becoming a Licensed Lay Reader.

We chatted a bit, he recommended some reading for me to do and a couple of courses I could take at a Renison Institute of Ministry. Then he sat back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest and said to me, "Have you ever considered the priesthood?"

I laughed.

Three men have come to visit Abraham, and he's bustling about, proving hospitality because he knows these guys are important. It doesn't tell us in the reading, but scholarship tells us that these three men were, in fact, angels. They were messengers, sent from God to test Abraham and by extension, his wife Sarah.

Sarah sees her husband hastily ordering a feast, fetching water so the men can wash their feet. He's ordering her about, telling her what to do, which I am sure she did not appreciate. He tells her to make up cakes, or what would be a type of bread on the hearth and orders a young calf to be prepared for eating. He gathers up curds and milk and presents it to the visitors while the rest of the meal is being prepared.

The men ask where Sarah is when Abraham goes back to entertaining them. He tells them that his wife is in the tent. Then they tell him the most remarkable news. That Sarah is going to be pregnant a year from that time. Sarah heard this and laughed.

Sarah laughed.

When I finally decided it was time to give this calling a serious test, George's wife Beth, who became, and still is, one of my most treasured friends, took me on my first retreat at the Sisters of St. John the Divine in Toronto, pardon me, Willowdale, Ontario. We were there for three days and it was a transformative experience. I don't remember much of what we did at the Convent. We were immersed in something ethereal and otherworldly, especially when we sang in the stone chapel.

What I remember most of that journey was the conversation in the car as we drove to and from the convent. Beth drove and we chatted non-stop. We put the world to rights on the way to the convent and spent the drive home talking about what I do now that I am, truly, listening to God's call.

When I got home I padded around my flat in Waterloo, and couldn't seem to settle. I sat down at my desk and opened my Bible. Joshua 5.15. "The Commander of the army of the Lord said to Joshua, 'remove your sandals for the ground where you stand is holy. And Joshua did so.'" I stared at that page for a long time.

I laughed.

Sarah is flabbergasted at what she's heard. She is well past childbearing years. Her husband has not looked at her in "that way", nor has she looked at him in "that way" in many, many years. You can understand her laughter. She is rolling this news around in her head, trying to figure out what all of this means. Of course she laughed. The entire idea is ridiculous, right?

The next time I saw George he suggested I prepare myself to preach. Now, please keep in mind I had not taken one Seminary course. I had taken some classes at Renison in learning how to lead worship as a lay person, but nothing like what I would take at Seminary. George was confident in my ability – an ability I did not yet know I had. So he gave me a couple of commentaries and the readings for a Sunday a month from then and I took every spare moment and read, studied and wrote.

The very first time I preached, it was on this first reading. Sarah, who is basically described as old as dirt, is told she's going to have a baby, at what would have been about the age of 90. She laughed. I asked an elderly parishioner at St. James what she would have done, had she been Sarah. She said "well, I know for certain I would not have laughed. I likely would have cried, and then smacked the angel that told me. I mean seriously, what were they thinking."

She laughed.

The thing is, Sarah doesn't know the entire story. Neither does Abraham. The men are discussing among themselves if they should share God's plan with Abraham...the plan that Abraham will become the father of a mighty nation...which means that Sarah will become the mother of a mighty nation. That through him, God will choose to bless all the nations of the earth. The idea seems preposterous.

Now, I'd love to tell you that it was a wonderful sermon and a star was born. Alas, it was not a wonderful sermon. Bishop Morse Robinson was in the congregation the day I preached, and afterwards he came up to me and said "You tried very hard, didn't you?" I nodded that I had worked very hard. He said "You're going to do it again." It wasn't a question, it was a statement. I asked Bishop Robinson for some feedback. He paused a while, a glint of mischief in his eyes and he said "that was a wonderful lecture. Filled with facts, and with scholarship, and about three times as long as it needed to be. It was an excellent lecture, not so great as a sermon." I smiled.

He laughed.

We live in a time of great stress and uncertainty. We are seeing people wearing masks when they venture out. I have a mask I keep in my purse, and when I feel people are not keeping appropriate distances from me, or there are too many people, I wear my mask. I don't necessarily like wearing it, but it does remind me that things are not "back to normal" and won't likely ever go back to how they were before.

When I was dropping off the Pentecost packages two weeks ago, I dropped one off in

Jaffray where my parishioner was entertaining her family. Her husband told me the kids were just leaving. I told him I could come back and he told me if his wife found out I went out there and she didn't see me, his life wouldn't be worth living.

I went up onto the deck and we chatted a bit, from a safe distance. Her youngest granddaughter came up and said "Hey! I know you!" then she turned to her grandmother and said "this lady is old, like you Grandma."

We laughed.

When we consider the stories of Abraham and Sarah, they seem quite fantastical. When we hear the stories of Jesus, some of them absolutely crazy. I mean, choosing the twelve apostles that he did. Fishermen? Okay. A tax collector or publican? Was he crazy? Publicans were despised.

And when he sends them on their way, they are sent with no staff, no money, no spare tunic – they are to depend entirely on the kindness of strangers. That's crazy! They are told that if hospitality is extended to them, that they will bless that place. If they are not extended hospitality, they are to shake off the dust on their sandals and continue on their way, taking the blessing with them.

Both the reading from Exodus and the Gospel of Matthew remind us of one tremendous thing. With God all things are possible.

We do not know what the future holds in store. We do not know how long we will be living in this liminal state of Good Friday. Yet we are told time and time again that if we put our trust in God, we will not be disappointed. We will not be forsaken. We will be, and are, loved extravagantly.

So, the next time you are told a fantastic story, remember that it may not seem like it is in any way possible. Yet with God – maybe, just maybe, it will be possible. In short, if your reaction is to laugh, know this...you're in excellent company.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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Genesis 18.1-18
Romans 5.1-9
Matthew 9.35-38, 10.1-23