

September 23, 2018

Women of the Bible: Sarah - Laughing WITH God and Others - Rev Seth D Jones

Genesis 11:29-30; 18:1-15; 21...; 23:1-2, 19

We are looking at Sarah today. The rabbis consider Sarah to be “The Princess of the World”. She is the Great Matriarch in the Jewish tradition, the mother of the Jewish people. She was also considered to be one of the four most beautiful people in the world, along with Rahab, Abigail, and Esther.

Sarah and Abraham have quite a few adventures beyond what we read today. She is a major player in this section of Scripture. Sarah, as Abraham’s wife, is in the presence of kings and queens, an equal of Abraham in virtually every way, and as our reading shows, the receiver of the promise of God.

In our story today, Sarah overhears the Lord telling Abraham that she and he will have a son together. Abraham is an old man, and Sarah is an old woman. Also, Sarah has been barren her entire life. She hears this and laughs to herself. A while ago, back in Chapter 17, Abraham heard the same thing and doubled over in laughter. He laughed so hard, he was brought to his knees. No one challenged Abraham for laughing. Today, Sarah laughs at the ‘*absurd disproportion between the divine promise and human possibility*¹.

She says to herself, “*After I have grown old and my husband has grown old, will I again have pleasure?*”

Then the Lord asked Abraham, “*Why did your wife laugh?*”

Sarah denied she ever did such a thing. “*I didn’t laugh.*”

God says, “*Yeah. Yeah, you did.*”

And that is the end of the exchange.

Why did Sarah laugh? We don’t know. I have a lot of sympathy with Sarah in this scene, because I am a person who can laugh at inappropriate times. There are so many things that seem funny to me, things that come together in strange ways. I have gotten better at least at apologizing when I laugh at something that no one else laughs at. Sometimes, it is nervous laughter. Sometimes, it is because I find something genuinely funny. As you can imagine, laughing is most problematic when I am dealing with issues surrounding death and tragedy. But...sometimes death and tragedy are also funny.

Up until just a few years ago, it was thought that the only creatures on the planet that laughed were human beings. Then scientists found out that bonobos and great apes and chimpanzees also laugh. Our primate friends all laugh mostly when they are at play. Unlike our primate friends, however, as far as the scientists can tell, only humans have different laughs for different situations. We have our joyful laughs, which is our response to humorous events and interactions. We have our ‘tickling’ laugh, which is different from other forms of laughter. And we have our derisive, sneering, sarcastic laugh.

¹ from a post entitled “God Has Brought Me Laughter”, by Dan Clendenin, at *Journey with Jesus*. accessed 9/19/18.

Two of our forms of laughter - tickling and joyful - do what laughter does for our primate friends. That kind of laughter bonds us to one another. It forms a deeper social relationship. The people we laugh with in joy and humor, or tickling (if you like that sort of thing), are the people with whom we have the deepest relationship. Social scientists have found that people who laugh during a conversation talk much longer than people who do not laugh when talking. Laughter bonds us to one another.

But what is laughter? Why do we laugh at all? It is a weird, funny thing, isn't it? Laughter falls into the same category of behavioral unknowns as yawning. No one knows why we yawn. There are theories, but all of them are easily disproven by other examples. Yawning, though, doesn't really communicate anything to other people, or at least anything we know yet. Laughter communicates something.

The most obvious thing that is communicated when someone laughs is that something is funny, humorous. What makes something funny? It is a great question, and I am not unaware that trying to figure out what makes something funny actually makes a funny thing less funny. Although...sometimes I think a joke or humorous thing is funny but I don't know why, then someone explains it to me and I laugh again. But I really laugh when I finally get it. So sometimes what is truly funny may take a while, at least for me.

If you ask a comedian what is funny, they might tell you, "Well...If you trip and fall, and you do it in a spectacular way, I might think that is very funny. But if I trip and fall, I am pretty sure that is a tragedy." What is humorous is a very subjective thing to talk about. What I find funny may not be to you. Sometimes, the humor trends to something offensive in the day and age, but if we stay with the performance or joke long enough, we will see that the humor is actually a social statement as well. Being offensive to highlight injustice is a great American art form.

But here is what I think makes a thing funny. First, when two unconnected events or things are brought together in a way that couldn't happen, or actually did happen, that can be very funny. My favorite joke does this, but it takes a while to tell it, and everyone hates me after I tell it - but that doesn't make it any less hilarious.

Moth joke here - see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOB89NlPrC8>

Second, what makes a thing funny is if we are laughing with other people, rather than at other people. Laughing at other people is more often than not an act of derision and destruction of relationship. Satire gets around this, and the best satire works when my goal is to have you all laugh with me at something. My first concern is that you laugh with me; secondarily is the thing or person we are laughing at. But mostly, laughing with people is always better than laughing at people. Telling the difference could make a huge difference in our present culture.

In virtually every commentary I read for this sermon, Sarah is presented as one who denies God's power, as someone who laughs at God. She is presumed to be rebuked by God. She is held up as an example of how not to be with God. What kind of laugh did Sarah laugh behind that tent when she overheard the Lord tell Abraham the prophecy? We don't know, but centuries

of smart men want to tell you what to think about this story. Don't be like Sarah, they say. Sarah laughs at God. Abraham also laughed a chapter before, and is not questioned on it; it must be because Abraham laughed with God rather than at God.

Nothing in the text indicates this to be true. Sarah denies laughing the same way you and I would if someone presented us with an outrageous proclamation, even if we did laugh. We don't have any clue what is going on here, so why is Sarah condemned by literally millenia of interpreters for laughing, but Abraham isn't? Why would Sarah say what she says in Chapter 21 if her laughter was a denial of God, or a derisive laugh at and against God? Why is Abraham the paragon of faith, the 'Knight of Faith', as Kierkegaard calls him, and Sarah is not the same?

Because the men and even some of the women were all saying the same thing, I asked a woman why Sarah might have laughed and been questioned by God. She gave me the very best interpretation of this passage I have ever heard. Perhaps, this woman said, Sarah laughs at the idea of herself ever experiencing laughter and pleasure again. And when God confronts her, perhaps Sarah doesn't want to reflect on her own incredulity of ever experiencing pleasure and laughter again. Isn't that why you and I laugh at awkward times? Something seems wildly out of whack with who we are, and the division between who we are and what is supposed to happen is so wide, we can only laugh. And if confronted on it, we try to find an answer that means our laughter means something other than what laughter might actually mean. Perhaps Sarah laughs not at God, but at herself, because of what she can't believe about herself, not what she believes about God.

Because the simple fact of this story, the words on the page, say nothing about Sarah's lack of faith. She is the Princess of the People. She is the mother of the promise of God for the world, the first of as many people as the stars in the sky. At the beginning of Chapter 21, the words say:

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.

Abraham names his new son Isaac, which means something like 'he laughs', or 'laughter', in Hebrew. The fulfillment of God's promise, the one designated to bring the promise into the future, is named 'he laughs'. Sarah reflects on what has happened across all the years of waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises. Sarah reflects on her relationship with Abraham and all their adventures. Sarah reflects on standing outside the tent and overhearing the Lord speaking with her husband. And what does she say about it?

She says,

'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'

These are not the words of someone who has laughed at God. They are the words of someone who has laughed with God, and recognizes that laughter with God is also a gift from God.

American Christianity has the fatal fault of taking itself so very seriously. Because of this, we miss humor in the Bible. Stories that were meant to be funny are interpreted with deadly seriousness. The Prodigal Son story is supposed to be funny, so that the serious turn with the brother at the end has more meaning. The woman who loses a coin and then throws a party when it is found, which spends all the value of the coin, is meant to be a joke. I believe that Jesus before Pilate has moments of humor in it. When Pilate asks if he is the Son of God, Jesus answers with "You say so". I think that is meant to be a joke.

And why not? Is it not outrageous what God is doing for us? Many Christian mystics had great senses of humor. St. Francis used to play practical jokes on his friends and fellow monks. These mystics have great senses of humor because they see through to the sheer ridiculousness of what God is doing with and for us in the extravagance of God's steadfast love. It is so vast, and cares so much about you and me and everyone personally that it is ridiculous. It is outrageous. It can be hilarious.

So let us laugh with Sarah, and remember well that God's fulfillment of promises comes with laughter of joy and hope. Things that aren't supposed to be together - a very old woman with a very old husband having a child together, a single person becoming the parent of descendants that number like the stars in the sky, a modern person with their smart phones and internet access and 24 hour news believing that the Lord might care about her or him - come together in the great relationship we share with God.

Let's also remember why Sarah laughed - she laughed because the idea of pleasure had become unknown to her. Laughing with others brings us joy, hope, happiness, pleasure. Human pleasure, human laughter, human joy -these are gifts of God to be shared with one another. Why? Because God's pleasure is our pleasure; and when we take pleasure in one another and laugh with one another, when we laugh with Sarah upon hearing her story, God takes pleasure in us. Laughter is the sign that our pleasure and God's pleasure have unified themselves in us and our experience.

So let us laugh with Sarah, and in laughing with Sarah, let us also laugh with God.
Amen.