

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: What Are You Laughing At

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¹⁸ The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

³ He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,^[a] do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

⁹ "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

¹⁰ Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

- Genesis 18:1-15

²¹ Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac^[a] to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

⁶ Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." ⁷ And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

- Genesis 21:1-7

Transcript:

So Holy Spirit, we ask that you would come as we turn to your word, to help us to hear from you, learn from you, be changed by you. We ask this in your name, Jesus, amen. Well, hello Bell Pres, great to have you with us. I'm Scott Dudley, I'm the lead pastor, if you are new here. If you have a Bible turn to Genesis chapter 18, or you can just follow along. It is great. Thank you for joining us this Sunday for worship. Thank you for letting us be part of your Sunday morning.

There's a video. Some of you have probably seen on the internet. A kind of funny video of a little girl who has just had it with all the COVID shutdowns. So take a look.

Everything has to be shut down for everybody to be safe.

Yeah.

And it's just not fair, because everything that is fun also has to be shut down. And the only thing that is open is nothing. Nothing. Not even McDonald's, which is my favorite restaurant.

Yeah, McDonald's is shut down. You can pick up McDonald's in the drive thru.

No you can't.

Yeah.

You can't.

You can. You can go in the drive thru, but you can't go on the playground.

If you go through the drive thru, it's just boring because you have to wait for your food to come.

I love that. "If you drive through the drive through, it's just boring. And the only thing that is open is nothing." Oh man, girl, I hear ya. I think she speaks for all of us. I have had similar COVID meltdowns, only I didn't respond as maturely as she did in that one. Our whole lives have been disrupted. Our plans have been canceled. We've been redirected in a massive way this year in 2020. Businesses ruined, graduation and prom ruined. College students at home taking courses online, but still paying full tuition said the father of two college students. Older people feeling isolated and cut off. Can't see their family. Can't see their grandkids.

I was talking to my aunt a couple weeks ago and she said, "I'm 86 years old and I don't have very many years left and I didn't want to spend one of them like this." No kidding. All of our plans have been redirected, which is why we're doing a sermon series called Redirected, about people in the Bible whose lives were massively disrupted and how they handled it and what God did with it. And today we're going to look at a woman named Sarah, who was married to a guy named Abraham.

And God says to both of them, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land that I will show you." And I've always thought that last little phrase there is weird. "I'll show you?" I'd ask for a lot more questions, "Where is this land? Is it a good land? Are we there yet?" And then God says, "If you follow me, out of you will come a line of descendants that will inherit this land and become the nation of Israel." So Abraham and Sarah were redirected, away from their country, to wander in the desert. And the years go on and on and on. And still the child that they were promised hasn't appeared.

And eventually, by the time Sarah is 90 years old, she goes, "You know what, maybe this kid thing isn't going to happen. Just saying, I'm 90 years old. I don't know where that promise went to, but apparently it's not going to come true." So having been redirected once away from their country, they're now redirected again, the promise child hasn't shown up. So another redirection into childlessness. None of her plans have come true. But then in chapter 18 of Genesis, God shows up with two angels. And in verse nine, they say this, "'Where's your wife, Sarah?' They asked Abraham. 'They're in the tent', he said. Then one of them said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife will have a son.'" Now Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent. Abraham and Sarah were already very old and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out, and my Lord is old, will I now have this pleasure.""

And in the original Hebrew, the word she uses for worn out, for old, in Hebrew means, worn out old shriveled, useless. What a way to describe yourself. Shriveled and without use. Because see back in her culture, women were told that the only value they had was if they had a child, and she didn't have a child. So she's come to believe that she is old, worn out, shriveled useless. And so she laughs. And I've always liked the fact that Sarah laughs, because I think laughter is really important. Laughter lowers

blood pressure. It reduces stress, hormones. It boosts your immune system. And I don't think we laugh enough. Laughter's the best medicine. And I'm not sure, especially in this season, that we're laughing enough.

One of the things I really miss, actually I miss everything about you not being here. But one of the things I miss is being able to try to say something funny and try to hear you guys laugh, because it just doesn't work very well over the camera. You say something funny and it just sits there and it's just awkward. We're not laughing enough. It's interesting. Studies show that children laugh up to 200 times a day, but that adults only laugh 26 times a day. And people in New Jersey never laugh. See, that was funny. Nothing. Crickets, not even the camera guy laughed. Oh, he smiled a little bit. Okay.

If laughter's the best medicine, some of you are probably like, "Well then I'm in the placebo group because I don't see anything to laugh about." That's how Sarah felt, because see her laugh in this text is not the good kind of laughter I was just talking about. It's a cynical bitter, laughter. God says, "You're going to have a son." And she's like, "Yeah, right, like that's going to happen. I am 90 years old." She scoffs. She has no hope. Maybe she's afraid to hope, because she doesn't want to be disappointed again. Doesn't want the vulnerability of hope. But God is going to redirect her one more time from hopeless to hopeful. And in the process, turn her bitter laughter into the laughter of freedom and joy.

And in the process, it shows us a couple of things that we can do. A couple of ways that God helps us get out of our disappointment when we've been redirected. And the first thing he does when our plans fall through, we're disappointed. He redirects our false narratives about ourselves. Sarah says, "I'm old. I'm shriveled. I'm without use." Because she is childless in a culture that said a woman's only worth was to have a kid. And I think we also face cultural expectations. Culture says, "You need to get these kinds of grades, and be this kind of athlete and make this amount of money, and accomplish these kinds of things." I don't think our culture respects older people very well. It can make older people feel like they are irrelevant, pushed to the side.

Has someone made you feel useless? Has culture made you feel useless? Because notice what God does here. The text says this, "Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? And say, "Well, I really have a child now that I'm old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year. And Sarah will have a son."

Sarah's afraid. So she pretended and said, "I didn't laugh." But he said, "Yeah, you did. You laughed." And always like that last line. "I didn't laugh."

"Yeah, you did."

"Did not."

"Did so."

"Did not."

"Did so."

"Did not." You're arguing with God, Sarah. You're not going to win.

What does God do here? Does he say, "Oh you laughed. You're bitter. You're cynical. I'm going to go find someone else who's more filled with faith." No, God quotes back to Sarah her own words, "Will I really have a child?" But when God quotes them back, he leaves out the word that means shriveled and without use. He edits her original statement and redefines who she is. "You're not useless. Nobody is useless. And I have a plan for you, Sarah, not just your husband, Abraham, I have a plan for you. So you just remember that you laughed, because I'm about to give you something to really laugh about." And we'll get to that in a minute.

So in a culture where only men were deemed worthy to connect with God, God comes for Sarah, not Abraham. Earlier, in previous chapters, God has told Abraham about the promised son, Abraham also

laughed. But in this story, God comes for Sarah. And the reason we know that is because the first thing the visitors say to Abraham is, "Where's your wife. We want her to hear this. We're not here for you. Where's Sarah?" The God of the universe meets her, which makes her feel valuable, worthy, loved, not useless. God redirects her attention away from what culture tells her and who culture says that she is, to who God says that she is.

And I think this COVID time, it's an opportunity for us to let God redirect our thinking from what culture says we're supposed to be, who culture says that we're supposed to be, who other people say that we're supposed to be, to who God says that we are. And when that happens and we know how much he loves us and who we are in his sight, you feel less bitter. You feel less hopeless, because God's with you.

Second thing that God does here is he redirects our focus from our problems to what he can do. Is there some area in your life where you feel hopeless? A relationship, health, finances, school, job? And if someone were to say, "Hey, I think God's going to bless you in the middle of that problem", maybe you'd be like Sarah and go, "Yeah right. Like that's going to happen. How can God bring me joy in my loneliness? Or joy in this health problem? Or joy in this school problem? Or joy in this relationship problem?" But notice what God says to Abraham and Sarah, "Is anything too hard for God? You think your circumstances mean I can't bring you joy and laughter, but I can, even in the middle of your circumstances." Because you see, nothing is impossible for God. And he breaks out of our boundaries of reason and common sense to do what we wouldn't expect.

In my former church, there was a man who had cancer and at one of our worship services, he got prayed for. And as we were praying for him, he said he felt some heat inside his body. And he said, "Maybe that's me being cured." And we said, "Well, that's great. And we're praying for that. And we hope God does that. But even if you're not cured, God can meet you in different and other ways." And he was like, "No, I actually think something happened." And we're like, "Okay, but maybe that was just God's presence to comfort you. Could you just shrink your God down a little bit there dude? Because you're getting a little Pentecostal on us and it's making us nervous. Smaller God."

A month later we got an email from his doctor who said, "Well, his cancer has gone without treatment. I have no explanation for why it disappeared. But he asked me to send you this email, because he said his pastors didn't believe that this could happen." That's embarrassing. And we've had similar stories here. And I know that raises lots of questions. Like why does God do a miracle for someone, and doesn't do a miracle for so many other people?

And I've talked about that and lots of sermons in the past, talked about that a lot. I'm always telling stories about when the miracle doesn't happen, but how God shows up and gives people supernatural peace and supernatural joy, which I do believe happens. But sometimes, I think especially in like Presbyterian churches and where there's a lot of educated people, I think sometimes we work so hard to talk about what happens when God doesn't do the miracle that we forget to talk about what happens when he does, because sometimes he does. God redirects our narrative from who culture says we are to who he says, redirects our focus on our problems to, he can do, because nothing's impossible for him.

Next, he redirects bitterness into wonder. So when God says, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" The Hebrew word there can mean awe and wonder. Is anything too wondrous for God? Do you have awe and wonder? It's like little kids, like four year olds, five year olds. They have tons of awe, tons of wonder. They can also throw some massive fits, but they also have lots of awe and lots of wonder. But we lose it over time, which by the way is a good reason when we start to come back together for you to volunteer in our children's ministry, because being around kids can help you recapture that sense of awe and wonder, because they have it. You never hear little kids going, "I don't know my life is just a void of meaning and purpose. And I lack a certain [foreign language 00:24:08], leading inextricably to the lacuna of despair."

You never hear a four year old say that. The littlest things fill them with wonder. Like, "Ooh, moth, look at that. Oh." so how do we get filled with awe and wonder, because we lose it over time? Well, I think it helps if you start by reminding yourself, thinking about, meditating over and over on this amazing truth. That while we were still sinners, the God of the universe who created us, became one of us in Jesus, died on the cross to pay the price for our sins, was raised again from the dead. He died the death we deserve, so we could live the life he came to give us. That's an amazing truth. And I know you've heard it a lot before, but it never ceases to be amazing just because we've heard it before. So meditate on it, dwell on it, let it sink into your heart, because when we experience that we are loved that much, again, it helps us be less bitter, less disappointed, less cynical, more hopeful.

So how do we do that? How do we get that into our hearts? There are four ways. I call them the big four. Prayer and especially listening for those thoughts that may come from God. Scripture, which helps us focus on him. Worship, helps us have a sense of wonder. I think for me, especially, the music. And I know it's hard online. I know there's a ton of distractions, but do your best. Don't be having worship going on the TV, or the computer while you're also checking Instagram and checking your email and all that stuff. Have you ever done that when you're watching online? Are you doing that right now? Stop. Pay attention, sing, or at least mutter the words of the song, or at least think about the words of the songs. Pray, when someone's praying, pray with them. Prayer, scripture, worship.

And then the fourth thing that helps us connect us to God is community. And in fact, this fall, we're going to give you an opportunity to be part of that. We're going to give you a chance to be part of an eight week, online, small groups. And every group is going to have a trained facilitator and the groups will be part of this sermon series, tied to the fall sermon series. And it's just eight weeks. So you're not stuck with these people for life. Or you could get together a group of people you already know, or invite some neighbors, or co-workers, or friends, as a way to grow in our faith and get to know people. And I know some of you are like, "I don't want to be part of a small group." I know, I know, but I think it's really important. I'm in two small groups, because it helps me grow in my faith. So, that's coming in September. The big four, help us be more connected to God.

And then the other way to have awe and wonder of God, as I've said before is to get curious. What can God do with this problem? What can God do in this COVID time? Because when we see God bringing good things out of bad things, it gives us more of a sense of awe and wonder. And when God gets bigger, our problems seem smaller by comparison. When we've been redirected and disappointed, God redirects our false narratives about ourselves, redirects our focus from our problems to what he can do, redirects bitterness into wonder and finally, redirect cynical laughter to the laughter of freedom and joy.

If you move ahead from Genesis 18, a couple more chapters, fast-forward to chapter 21. And this is what it says. "Now, the Lord was gracious and did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son. Abraham gave him the name, Isaac. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter." See, she laughs again a second time. "And everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham, that Sarah would nurse children. Yet I have born him a son in his old age."

So Sarah's first laugh, back in chapter 18, was bitter and cynical laughter. But the second time here in this chapter, 21, she laughs again, but this time it's the laughter of freedom and joy, because God's grace has injured her despair in two ways. First, God gave her a child. She wanted a child, she had a child. Now, she was 90 years old, which sounds terrible to me. That sounds awful. But she liked it and that's all that matters. But then there's a second way that God's grace entered her life. Because I think to say that the moral of this story is that if we just have enough faith like Sarah, God will eventually give us our impossible dream misreads this story.

For starters, Jesus had more faith than anyone and he still got crucified. The other problem with saying that this story shows that if we have enough faith like Sarah, God will give us what we want, is that

Sarah didn't have any faith. That's the point when we are faithless, God is still faithful and brings his grace into our lives. And it's interesting, Abraham and Sarah named their son for their lowest moment of faith. Isaac means, "He laughs", which is what Abraham and Sarah both did when God said they were going to have a kid. They both laughed. It's their lowest moment of faith, it's their failure of faith. But they named their son after their failure, "He laughs", because they are no longer defined by that failure. Sarah's not defined by her performance, or her achievements. She's free.

And when she says, "God has given me laughter and everyone will laugh with me", the original Hebrew could also mean, "And everyone will laugh at me." Most English translations can't bear to translate it that way, but in the Hebrew it could be, "They will laugh at me." And it makes sense, because what do you think it looks like to see a 90 year old woman nursing a baby. It looks funny, you don't see that every day.

She names her son after her failure of faith and says, "Everyone is going to laugh at me, and I don't care. I'm free from their opinion of me, free from my culture's expectations of me. Free from my bitterness and my despair, because in my disappointment, the grace of God entered my life. Not after I had the child, but even before, even before my circumstances improved, the God of the universe met me personally, showing me that I am not worn out and old and useless. If you're not dead, you're not done. He still has a plan for me. And I am precious in his sight. And because I know that I am free." Her laughter is the laughter of freedom and joy.

I have a friend who a number of years ago was asked to be an elder at his church. And he really felt like God was asking him to do that. But right after he became an elder, his boss told him that he was being transferred to another city for his job. And my friend prayed about it, still felt called to that church. So he told his boss, "I can't do that. I can't move. I just became an elder in my church. And I think that's what God wants me to do." And the boss, not a Christian, was like, "That makes no sense at all. And if you don't go to this different city, then I'm going to have to fire you." And so my friend said, "Well, then you're going to have to fire me." So he got fired. He was unemployed for almost a year. And this is in Silicon Valley where everyone has impressive sounding jobs. Movers and shakers. And it is hard, in that environment, when someone says, "What do you do?" To say, "I'm unemployed." Hard for his kids to say, "My dad doesn't have a job."

However, as the months went on, he noticed that he was thriving as an elder. Loved a praying with people, loved helping people to connect with Jesus, loved the financial oversight, because he was really good with money and he could help his church be good stewards of God's resources. And then gradually, because he felt God using him, not having a job didn't feel embarrassing to him anymore. Even in Silicon Valley, because he felt that he was being used for an eternal purpose. Well, one morning he was praying with his fellow elders. And one of them after prayer said, "I just got this thought when we were praying, today's the day you're going to get a job."

And my friend said, "Well, that's impossible, because I don't have any interviews. I don't even have any prospects right now." But later that day he was having lunch with a friend and the friend said, "Oh, by the way, my company, it's in startup mode and we have an opening for a job. Why don't you stop by after lunch?" So that's what he did, got to talk to the CEO. And here's where it gets a little bit weird. Interview was going really well. And then my friend felt this nudge from God to ask for 10% of the company. And he knew that it was God, because that is absolutely not the thing he would ever come up with. In fact, he was thinking, "No, that doesn't make any sense. That's against common sense. No, no, no, no, no. That's rude. You don't do that in the first interview. No, no, no. It's crazy."

But the nudge would not go away. So finally he said, "Well, I think for what I can do for you, you should give me 10% of the company." And the CEO is like, "Wow, that was inappropriate. But at least you got guts. I'll think about it." Well, a couple hours later, later that day, the CEO called my friend and said, "You know what, I've been thinking about it. We need people that have that kind of courage, so the

job's yours." Now, my point is not to do that in your next job interview. He had a specific call to do that. My point is this. In a barren season, unemployed, because he was following God's call, he had been redirected in a major way out of one job into unemployment. God rewrote the Silicon Valley narrative. That if you don't have an impressive job, then you're shriveled and you're useless.

And like Sarah, he was freed from those cultural expectations. God expanded his horizon of possibilities, showing that there's nothing that's too hard for God. And that it's possible to have joy in hard time, possible to find meaning outside of achievement, redirects his focus from his problems to what God can do and filled him with awe and wonder. And he can do the same for you. And the same for me.

In this story, Sarah cynically laughs at the idea of having a son, maybe to protect herself from hope, doesn't want to be disappointed again, doesn't want the vulnerability of hope. But God entered her disappointment and turned her cynicism into joy. And he can do the same for us in this difficult season that we are in right now. Where are you afraid to even hope for something? Like Sarah, let God in and let God use this time that we are in to redirect your focus from who culture says we are, to who God says you are. Redirect your focus from your problems to what he can do, because nothing is impossible for God.

So what are you laughing at? Because no matter what the circumstances. Our God can give you the laughter of freedom and of joy. So Jesus, thank you for that and help us to believe it, help us to live it. Help us every day, Lord, to experience your wonder. How big you are so that our problems can seem smaller. Lord, we have faith, but we also lack faith like Sarah and Abraham, Lord, we scoff at your promises. So Jesus, in this time, help us to know you better, be more sure of your promises and turn to you for our ultimate victory over everything that we face. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Please read Genesis 18-21

1. Why do you think Sarah laughs in this story?
2. Why do you think Sarah tries to hide the fact that she laughed?
3. The name Isaac means "he laughs". Why do Abraham and Sarah give their son this name in light of the fact that they both laughed when God gave them the promise (see also Genesis 17:17)?
4. What's the main message of this story for you?