

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Laughter"

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-5; 21:1-7; Mark 10:27

Opening Hymn: In the bulb there is a flower 674

Closing Hymn: For all the love 440 tune: sine nomine

Children's Hymn: Give me oil in my lamp 655

Choruses: This is my commandant, Cornerstone

Rev. Steve Filyk

September 15, 2019

In the small prairie town I grew up  
Most of the kids I knew had ordinary names  
Spelled in ordinary ways.

Robert.  
Lisa.  
Steven.

But one family was different.  
They gave their children unusual names.

The oldest was named 'Fortune'.  
The middle child was named 'Land'.  
And the youngest was named 'Lease'.

I don't know the reason for their names.  
But I'm certain there is a story behind each of them:  
Fortune, Land, Lease.

Ever encounter an unusual name? Probably...  
Ever met a little boy or girl named 'laughter'?  
You'd be sure there was a good story  
Behind that name.

## PAUSE

Last week our Bible passage took us to Genesis chapter two.  
In Genesis chapter two we are told how God creates man  
and plants him in God's garden.

It is an idyllic beginning,  
But one that goes downhill quickly,  
As those who have read the ongoing story know.

Today we have fast-forwarded  
Over all the chaos and rebellion and grace  
That followed this ancient beginning.

We jump into the Biblical narrative about Abraham  
Midway into his story in Genesis chapter 18.

Earlier in Genesis chapter 12 God calls Abraham to leave  
His land and his people and go to a land  
that God would show him.

Abraham is promised fame.  
Abraham is promised children.  
Abraham is told that he will be blessed  
And that others will be blessed through him.<sup>i</sup>

This call and these blessings are:  
"the beginning of God's answer to [all those sad intervening stories  
That we skipped over.

Stories that showcase] the evil of human hearts,  
the strife of nations,  
and the groaning brokenness of [the] whole creation.

[Abraham's call] is the beginning of the mission of God  
and the mission of God's people.<sup>ii</sup>

I mentioned that Abraham's story begins in Genesis chapter 12.  
Well today we catch up to Abraham many years later.  
In Genesis chapter 18 we meet a much older Abraham  
blessed him with property and possessions  
but without any descendent  
that he and his wife Sarah can call their own.

Today we meet Abraham sitting outside his tent.  
We are not told what he is doing.  
Perhaps he is contemplating his legacy,  
Wondering what will happen after him?

Perhaps he is thinking about God  
And those long-awaited promises?  
Perhaps he is trying to find a little peace and quiet by himself.

But as he is sitting there, all of a sudden three men appear.  
According to the custom of the day  
Abraham invites them into his home  
to join him for a meal.

While he promises some small refreshments  
he immediately starts to work on a feast.<sup>iii</sup>

Abraham runs back and forth  
Making all sorts of arrangements.  
And soon a fine meal is being served  
For his guests.

The first party of the story focuses on Abraham's hospitality.  
But at this point, the action soon passes on to the guests.

They ask about his wife.

Then one of them makes a startling prediction:  
She will soon be pregnant.

When Sarah hears this  
(she is eavesdropping outside the dining room),  
When Sarah hears this she laughs.

In my mind it's a cynical laugh: Ha! Yah right!

She knows what Abraham's guest is thinking.  
He is thinking that this rich old man Abraham,  
has a young fertile wife.

Ha! Yah right!  
If he had only seen Sarah:

The love of Abraham's youth,  
Face marked with wrinkles.  
Hair gone grey.  
Long past menopause.

Ha! Yah right!  
That isn't going to happen.

But when this laughter is overheard.  
This laughter is confronted.  
One of the guests, whom the text now reveals to be God,  
Asks Abraham why Sarah was laughing.

Perceiving her age,  
Perceiving that she is long past child-bearing,  
he questions: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

And then he boldly restates the promises:  
"I will return to you at the appointed time next year,  
And Sarah will have a son."<sup>iv</sup>

Is anything too hard for the Lord? SLOWLY  
Is anything too hard for the Lord? SLOWLY

This is something we ask ourselves  
We when assess our old dreams,  
when we reflect on God's promises.

We live in a world that is marked by hard truths  
And limited possibilities.

But the Bible tells us stories about a God  
who isn't bound by such things...

And as the story fast-forwards.  
We find old Sarah nursing her newborn.

A woman who should be in the geriatric ward,  
Has just had her first baby.

The name of the boy?  
Isaac—laughter.  
Laughter.

Sarah warmly chuckles to herself  
As she imagines the gasps of amazement  
When she corrects those admiring her newborn:

“This isn’t my grandson, no, it’s my son!”

Isaac—laughter.  
“God has brought me laughter,  
And everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.”<sup>v</sup>

Those familiar with the story of Abraham  
Will recognize that today’s story  
holds together some contradictions.

In the broader story Abraham is remembered as a man of faith.  
But when it came to having this child, both he and Sarah doubted.

There might have been a time  
When they were hopeful.  
They may have even set aside a room in their house.

But after waiting for years they had become  
“accustomed to their barrenness.  
They [became] resigned to their closed future...

The gospel promise [of today's story]  
does not meet them in receptive hopefulness  
but in resistance hopelessness."<sup>vi</sup>

Of course, the good news of this story  
Is that "God's way will not be thwarted,  
even when it runs against...  
human expectation and experience."<sup>vii</sup>

Abraham and Sarah will have that promised child.  
They will have those promised descendants.

They will call themselves blessed  
They will bless others.

PAUSE

But God's blessings aren't just for Abraham and Sarah.  
In Christ we share in his blessings.  
In Christ we share in his calling  
To bless others.

Now most of us can recognize that we have been blessed.  
That is not difficult.

But some of us question whether we can be a blessing.  
Like Abraham and Sarah many of us are past our active years.  
Our biggest goal is to try not to be a burden.  
We can't imagine bringing much good to those around us.

The same thing might be said about the church community  
Here at St. Andrew's.

Most of us could stand up and note some of the blessings  
we have received among this people  
and in this place.

But to think that we might bless others,  
outside our small congregation?

Well that's something a bit harder for us to grasp.  
Some might even laugh cynically if I started repeating  
Those words of the pastor I spoke of last week.

The one who said about his own congregation:  
"We want to be so vital to the community around  
us that if we ever closed our doors,  
the entire neighborhood would be upset."<sup>viii</sup>

Could that be something that is said about St. Andrew's?  
Someone's bound to laugh:  
Ha! Yah right!

How is this congregation at this stage of our life  
Ever going to make a difference in our neighborhood?  
Most of us are old. And pretty much all of us are tired.  
The energy of our youth has been spent.

Ha! Yah right!



But wait a second and ask yourself that important  
Question of today's story:  
"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

The Lord hasn't promised to fill all our dreams and grant all our wishes.  
God's may never see to it that these pews are filled  
Or that you get your lost hearing back.

But God has promised to bless us  
And God has promised to make us a blessing.

Even if you still can't see it,  
One day God's gonna make you laugh.

To God be all the glory.  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> See Genesis 12:2-3

<sup>ii</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright *The Mission of God's People* 65,66

<sup>iii</sup> See NRSV "Let me bring a little bread..." Genesis 18:5

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 18:14 NIV

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 21:6 NIV

<sup>vi</sup> Walter Brueggemann *Genesis* 159

<sup>vii</sup> Lawrence W. Farris "Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Old Testament and Acts* 35

<sup>viii</sup> Preston Sprinkle quoting Josh Butler "If Your Church Closed Its Doors, Would the Neighborhood Care?" *Patheos* September 14, 2015 <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/theologyintheraw/2015/09/if-your-church-closed-its-doors-would-the-neighborhood-care/>