

God's Invitation to Serve: Sarah
Genesis 21:1-7; Ephesians 3:14-21
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Genesis 21:1-7

The Lord was attentive to Sarah just as he had said, and the Lord carried out just what he had promised her. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son for Abraham when he was old, at the very time God had told him. Abraham named his son—the one Sarah bore him—Isaac. Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old just as God had commanded him. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born. Sarah said, “God has given me laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me.” She said, “Who could have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons? But now I’ve given birth to a son when he was old!”

Ephesians 3:14-21

This is why I kneel before the Father. Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by him. I ask that he will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you’ll have the power to grasp love’s width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you’ll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God.

Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen.

E.B. White was the author of *Charlotte's Web* and a contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine for more than fifty years. One of his most famous quotes was,

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested in it and the frog dies.

Well, actually some people are interested in it.

I recently watched a Ted Talk by Pete McGraw, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He was so interested in figuring out why some things

are funny and other things are not that he started the Humor Research Lab, which he abbreviates as HuRL, naturally.

His theory is actually pretty complicated and the video is worth watching. But the aspect that I want to bring out now is his theory that one way to be funny is for it to seem impossible that something be true.

Take, for instance, bulletin bloopers. Typos make normal announcements impossible be true.

Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It is a good chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.

No one working at rummage is actually going to sell their spouses. Right? Right?

Ushers will eat latecomers.

Of course ushers aren't going to eat latecomers. Right? Right?

Another example? I recently got a card with a kitten on the front of it, with its paws extended up in the air and an ecstatic look on its face. The caption said, "Praise Hands!" It's funny because all of the kittens that I know are Presbyterians, and Presbyterian kittens would never do "praise hands"!—It's impossible!

So anyway, Pete McGraw is interested in analyzing humor, despite EB White's claim that few are interested in it. I'm interested in it too, because of the way that laughter infuses the story of Sarah, Abraham, and Isaac in our Old Testament passage this morning.

A few chapters before this part of the story, God tells Abraham that he and Sarah will have a son and that her ancestors will become great nations. Abraham immediately "falls on his face" and laughs:

“Can a 100-year-old man become a father, or a 99-year-old woman have a child?”

Even though these ages seem exaggerated to our modern ears, it’s clear that the author wants us to know that they are both way past the age of having kids. Abraham knows he can’t possibly have a son, so he laughs. Scoffs, really. It’s so ridiculous!

A little later in the story Sarah overhears God telling Abraham that within a year she’s going to have a son. She laughs to herself and says,

I’m no longer able to have children and my husband’s old.

Again, that’s about as likely as a kitten giving praise hands. So Sarah gives a scoffing laugh.

Their laughter is the last we hear about this crazy idea of a baby coming until we get to today’s passage. And suddenly Sarah is pregnant and she gives birth to Isaac—a name which means, appropriately, “He laughs.”

And she’s laughing again:

“God has given me laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me. Who could have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons? But now I’ve given birth to a son when he was old.”

It is still as unlikely as a kitten giving praise hands.

But Sarah’s not scoffing any more. She’s laughing because it seems impossible—and it happened! It’s still funny because it seems so impossible—but now she knows it’s true, by a miracle of God’s presence. So it’s still funny because it seems impossible, but it’s even crazier because it’s actually true.

And I bet Sarah joins with the kitten in giving “Praise Hands!”

Now, when we read this passage we do see how patriarchal the Ancient Near East is. The story is told emphasizing again and again how old Abraham is, as if Sarah wasn't almost as old...and as if Sarah wasn't the one doing virtually all of the work in having this baby. It repeatedly says that Sarah gave birth to a son for Abraham, as if Isaac wasn't just as much hers.

So if we wrote up this story today, we might choose different words.

But we'd want to make sure we didn't lose the point of the story: that what seems impossible to us is not impossible to God. The future that we think could never happen becomes real, because God is leading us there. We scoff, and then we laugh at how crazy God's work has turned out to be.

I got an example of this when I was in high school. Mom became a trustee at the church, and at the first meeting they asked her to be the treasurer. She laughed and said, "I'm not even the one who balances the checkbook in our house!" It simply could not be that she was the best one on the board to take that role.

Fast forward a few years, and not only did she serve a really successful term as treasurer, but she agreed to chair a capital campaign for an upgrade to the organ. And that went great, too.

Even though Mom's been gone more than twenty years, I can still hear her laugh when I think about this story. It was hilarious to her that they thought she would be the right person to be treasurer—and then it was hilarious again that she had turned into this really key financial leader in the congregation. God certainly gave her laughter, and everyone at church was laughing with her!

We might think of Mom as a modern-day Sarah. They both certainly had a heart for service. In this sermon series, we're looking at how women throughout the Bible exemplify Christ's call that whoever would be great among us must be a servant.

Think about it: Sarah is way beyond child-bearing years, and during those long nine months of her pregnancy she must have worked hard to make sure that Isaac was born healthy. The scriptures don't line it out for us, but I can imagine Sarah watching what she ate. Doing exercises. Getting all of the sleep she needed. All the while taking care of Abraham in this patriarchal society.

Sarah's life was service, and her pregnancy was certainly service. And as she served, she gave birth to God's future...a future where her descendants would end up kings; a future where we could see what it means to be blessed to be a blessing...a future where she could laugh with all of her friends about the ridiculousness of God's blessings.

My favorite theologian Karl Barth puts it like this [paraphrased]:

Isn't it the contrast between [humans] and the honor God gives us that makes us laugh at ourselves? It's impossible that we bear God's honor and yet we do.

Sarah bore God's honor through her service, and she laughed.

When we serve, we're giving birth to God's future, too. And along the way, we might move from a laugh that scoffs because none of it seems possible, to a laugh that celebrates what our New Testament passage tells us is true: that God is able to do far more than we could ever ask or imagine.

I asked the women's Bible study on Wednesday mornings if they could think of a time when God made them laugh because of something happened that was truly impossible.

One of them said she had just been laughing with her husband about the All-Church Auction. She said that she could remember when the auction was held in the basement of the church, and everyone was happy they could raise even \$3000. Those were great days—I heard about the same

lamp getting bid on year after year, and the competition to see who would look best in whatever wig was getting auctioned off. I heard that there was lots of laughing at those old auctions.

But it sounds like if you had tried to tell the people there that there would be an auction in the future that raised tens of thousands of dollars with a paddle raise, they would have laughed in your face. That would have seemed impossible!

That's why this year's All Church Auction puts a smile on our faces. Imagine receiving more than \$60,000 from the paddle raise and only two live auction items. \$60,000 in less than twenty minutes! But \$60,000 because people were willing to serve our mission partners and to give birth to God's future.

God's future is already underway at the partner agencies funded by the Auction's proceeds. The gifts were enough to provide

- twenty nights at the shelter for ten women and children at Lake County Haven.
- A day of interim housing for 50 women in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood through Sarah's Circle.
- A whole library at a school through Reading Power
- And much, much more.

My guess is that as God's future is lived out among the clients of these agencies, there will be a lot of laughs about how impossible it had all seemed before.

Not everyone was present at the auction, but all of you join in giving birth to God's future through your service. Maybe it's caring for your neighbors as they try to hold their marriage together. Maybe it's volunteering at one of the agencies I mentioned above. Maybe it's serving on Chancel Guild or helping with confirmation. Maybe you serve

by loving your work colleague who really is hard to love, or by joining the board of a non-profit.

There are so many ways to serve, and when you do, you're giving birth to God's future, just like Sarah. It's hard not to laugh when we see what God brings about through us. And, of course, it's not just us who are smiling—Jesus is laughing, too.