

A Sermon preached at
Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, OR
“Sarah laughs: Unraveled by unexpected joy and surprise”
By Rev. Peter J. Blank
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7
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Today, we begin our “Unraveled” fall worship series from the people at A Sanctified Art. 12 weeks with 12 texts from the Bible that explore times when folks lives became unraveled. I suspect that it wasn’t difficult for the people at A Sanctified Art to come up with 12 biblical stories of unraveling. Rather, what was probably more difficult was limiting themselves to *only* 12.

These stories that we will be journeying with over the next 12 weeks contain the whole spectrum of human emotion - from the depths of despair and grief to the euphoria of laughter (and everything else in between). These stories are our stories. The truth we will find in them reflects the truth of our own messy lives in our own messy times.

Unraveling happens in many ways. Sometimes, we are unraveled by external forces. Unraveled by violence and injustice, unraveled by shame and greed. Sometimes, we unravel ourselves. Sometimes we allow ourselves to come unraveled by what we have done or by what we have left undone. And, sometimes, *God* is the great “unraveler” - coming into the status quo of our lives and shaking things up in ways that seem mysterious, unsettling, and just plain bizarre.

Our first “unraveled” passage comes to us from the Book of Genesis, through the story of a not-so-young couple named Sarah and Abraham. For no reason other than because God simply wanted to, God had chosen Sarah and Abraham to be the parents of God’s people. God had promised that their offspring would outnumber the stars in the sky.

There was only one problem. Decades had passed and no children had come their way. And, to rub salt in the wound, God had already changed both of their names in cruelly ironic ways. The husband had been called Abram, which means father. He was now called Abraham, which means father of many. The wife had been called Sarai, which means princess. She was now called Sarah, which means mother. Only, she wasn’t a mother. And he wasn’t a father, except for a son called Ishmael that he fathered with one of the hand-maidens, Hagar. And *that* situation didn’t end up very well for anyone involved.

So here they were. A 100 year old man called “father of many” and an 90 year old woman called “mother,” with no children between them. They had accepted their fate. They had given into the fact that this God was all talk and no results.

Many weeks ago it was Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. Both of these days we celebrate parents of all kinds. However, these two secular holidays can be particularly painful for those who wish to be parents who, for whatever reasons, struggle to conceive. know folks who deliberately avoid going to church on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day because their church makes such a big deal

about it and it's just too painful for them. Many of us, perhaps people in this very room, know the anguish of trying to get pregnant for years with no success.

Sarah and Abraham knew that anguish and because of it they had accepted that their future was barren.

But all that would change with a divine proclamation and some snarky laughter.

Just before today's passage, Abraham has an encounter with God. *"God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you will no longer call her Sarai. Her name will now be Sarah. I will bless her and even give you a son from her. I will bless her so that she will become nations, and kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham fell on his face and laughed. He said to himself, Can a 100-year-old man become a father; or Sarah, a 90-year-old woman, have a child? To God Abraham said, "If only you would accept Ishmael!" But God said, "No, your wife Sarah will give birth to a son for you, and you will name him Isaac."*

God gives another promise to Abraham and he literally falls on the floor laughing. Clutching his side, tears streaming down his cheeks, his face turning red, he laughs. It's just too absurd. It's been too many years. That ship has sailed. To accept this news would only set himself up for more disappointment. Sometimes, after thousands of "no's," you're just not able to believe the "yes" when it comes your way. So, Abraham, chooses to laugh.

Fast forward a few days and Abraham and Sarah are having a nice quiet evening to themselves. Had Abraham told Sarah about what God had said to him? We don't know. But what we do know is that God shows up in the form of three visitors and the same divine proclamation is given. The 100 year old man and the 90 year old woman will conceive.

This time, it's Sarah's turn to laugh. Like her elderly husband, she knows that what she's hearing is simply ridiculous. But, by this time, God's getting pretty tired of all the laughter. In a rather comical exchange, God points out her laughter, Sarah tries to deny it, and God calls her out on it.

Fast forward nine months and, behold, the child is born. And Sarah laughs again. But this laughter is a much different kind of laughter. Not a bitter, snarky, laughter. But a joyous laughter. A kind of laugh that can only be laughed when God has done something truly unexplainable, something truly remarkable. At the end of today's story, everyone is named *very* appropriately. The father is named "father." The mother is named "mother." And the son is named, Isaac, which, of course, means "laughter."

Walter Brueggemann says this of today's passage: "Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained. The newness is sheer gift - underived, unwarranted." Sarah laughed because just when she thought her life had become unraveled to the point of no return, God knit her back together in a way that she could never have foreseen.

Laughter is our natural response when we find our selves with unexpected joy and surprise.

- Sarah's laughter is the laughter that is laughed by a gay teenager, disowned by his family, who gets a hug from a woman with a "free mom hugs" t-shirt at a gay pride festival.

- Sarah's laughter is the laughter that is laughed when this church unexpectedly receives well over a 100 folks from this neighborhood during our recent Craft Fair or Rummage Sale.
- Sarah's laughter is the laughter that is laughed when someone who has experienced trauma finds joy again.
- Sarah's laughter is the laughter that is laughed by Hannah when she learned that she would give birth to her son Samuel.
- Sarah's laughter is the laughter that is laughed when a congregation in Puerto Rico, after Hurricane Katrina, hired a stand-up comic to perform a routine for their community that was dealing with the trauma of that natural disaster.
- Sarah's laughter is the laughter that is laughed when we discover that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord.

Friends, laughter is a necessary gift on this difficult journey of life. Laughter is a healthy antidote to the heaviness of this world. And in addition to being good for the soul, it's good for the body as well! 10-15 minutes of laughter can burn up to 50 calories! It increases your blood flow, boosts your immune system, and releases endorphins in your brain that give you a natural high.

- So, laugh, friends!
- Laugh at yourselves.
- Laugh at that funny TV show that you love.
- Laugh at what God is doing.
- Laugh at the expected joy and surprises.
- Be on the look out for joy when it comes creeping in when you least expect it.

- « Be practitioners of giggles.
- « Connoisseurs of hilarity.
- « Devotees of joy in strong supply.

When things come unraveled, fear not, for God's ability to do a new thing is stronger than whatever is causing the unraveling.

So let us join Abraham and Sarah and laugh out loud!