

“Sarah Laughed”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

September 15, 2019, Pentecost 14 NL 2019

Gen. 18: 1-15; 21: 1-7

**In the Narrative Lectionary this week, we have part of the story of Abraham and Sarah. You may remember that God has promised Abraham that he will be the father of many nations—he and Sarah will have descendants as numerous as the stars. And his descendants will inherit the land that God will give them.**

**Their story is complex, with lots of twists and turns—lots of pain and a real picture of what it means to be human. At the point where we enter it today, Abraham and Sarah have been wandering for a while. They don’t have either the land or a child. All they’ve got is the promise—which, at this point, probably seems like a pipe dream.**

**Then—in one of my favorite scenes in the Bible—God comes to visit. Abraham and Sarah don’t recognize these three visitors as God right away but they pour on the hospitality. After enjoying the feast, the visitors tell Abraham and Sarah what they have been waiting to hear for decades: “you will have a child.”**

**You could easily do a whole sermon on the hospitality part of this story—especially in these days in which we are living that seem so incredibly inhospitable. You could also do a whole sermon on the birth announcement—and how God comes into our lives—into this world in ways that change the whole story. But what intrigues me most is the relationship between hospitality and God coming into our lives.**

**Sarah laughed. When she overhears the unknown visitors say that she will have a son, *she laughs*. There’s something about that laughing that really gets to me.**

**We don’t know what kind of laugh it was—whether it was a scoffing kind of laugh—like “you’ve got to be kidding me” or whether it was a genuine imagining of herself being pregnant and how crazy that seemed. Or even, a joyful wonder about whether what she most wanted was actually happening. Maybe it was all of these responses rolled into one.**

**Sarah laughed. It just came out of her—not a carefully calculated response but an honest one. An unguarded one.**

**It’s only in recent years that I have appreciated the gifts that come from having a sense of humor. It was a friend from college who first said it to me—maybe 10 years ago. I literally had never thought of myself as someone with a sense of humor. But since that time, I’ve been paying attention to it—in myself but in others as well.**

**I love the late night comedy—which I can never stay awake for but which I do see in clips now and again. Apparently, this is the way most people get their daily news. At first, I was shocked and slightly**

horrified by that fact. But now, I get it. Comedy opens us up to hard news because it also points to other possibilities in the same breath. The actual news is delivered with the message, “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

I also love much less sophisticated comedy—Clare would say I love second grade comedy. She says that because I would break into laughter when Sarah would tell some story about what had happened at school. I did think it was funny but, more than that, it was Sarah laughing that made me laugh.

But the honest truth is that the laugh to beat all laughs is May’s. It doesn’t happen very often but now and again, she really lets loose. Sometimes, we’re not even sure what got her started but it is impossible not to join her in that laughter. It is utter joy. And it is contagious.

When we laugh, there is a kind of release, a letting down of our defenses, an openness to something new.

It’s a lot like hospitality. The definition of hospitality is “acts of benevolence toward those outside of one’s usual circle of family and friends.”

We tend to think of it as receiving people who come to us—but it can also be us going out and extending ourselves.

There was an amazingly touching story this week of a little boy named Whitaker. He just turned 4—on Wednesday, September 11—and it was the first time he had been healthy on his birthday. Whitaker was diagnosed with brain cancer when he was just 13 months old. But now, he is healthy enough to go to pre-school.

His parents wanted to make this birthday special. Whitaker loves yellow vehicles because he loves a cartoon character called the Bumblebee Transformer. There is a yellow car in their neighborhood and Whitaker often begs his parents to drive by that car on their way to school. So, Whitaker’s mom asked the owner to park the car in front of their house on his birthday. Then she decided to put the invitation out on Facebook—and other people reposted the invitation.

And on Wednesday morning, over 100 yellow vehicles—bulldozers, Camaros, school buses, yellow cabs—were there to wish Whitaker a Happy Birthday when he stepped outside his house. It was way beyond anyone’s imagining—this hospitality of strangers. And just like a whole-hearted belly laugh, the joy was contagious. By all accounts, the yellow vehicle owners loved it. They broke into song—Happy Birthday—when Whitaker first came out of his house, and then again when he arrived at school.

Sometimes—maybe even often—God works in understated, behind the scenes kinds of ways. But there are times when God works in outlandish, over the top kind of ways. Ways that might even make us laugh at just how unlikely they were.

I shared the story back in August of how we got a gift we never saw coming. In our quest to get our daughter, Sarah’s, special education needs met, we have been trying to get the school system to pay for the Lab School—a place where she has made massive leaps forward in learning. Out of the blue—in a meeting, not in a court hearing—DCPS proposed what we have been fighting for for over a year.

We didn’t laugh because we were so stunned—because this virtually never happens.

There were still a couple more steps after that meeting. We needed to go to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education who would make the placement and fund it. The placement officer agreed with the DCPS recommendation and gave us a list of 3 schools to consider. He asked us to let him know if we had a strong preference.

Our lawyer emailed us saying, “Tell him you want the Lab School.” I sent the placement officer an email that said a little more than that. I gave him the reasons why we wanted Sarah to stay at Lab—which is by far, the most expensive of the options he gave us. Then I said, “I recognize the significant expense that is involved in this placement. I also believe that the trajectory of Sarah’s life has been exponentially changed by her year at the Lab School, and that it is impossible to place a dollar value on that. The future I now see for Sarah is very bright and I believe she will make her mark on this world—and that, one day, you will be able to say “you knew her when...”

On Friday, we got a letter from the placement officer that told us Sarah will be placed a Lab for as long as we want her there.

This is a picture of how God comes to us—just like God came to Sarah and Abraham—offering us a future we might have given up on—offering us a future that is beyond what we could have imagined—or ever gotten to on our own.

Maybe we can’t believe it with our whole hearts and minds yet—*but maybe we can laugh about the possibility.*

I know we’re not at Christmas yet, but the hymn we are going to sing expresses better than any other I could think of how God comes to us in outlandish ways. Thanks be to God. Amen.