

St. Mary's Episcopal Church  
June 18, 2023

Message by Rev. Michael Burke  
Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

## Laugh Hath Been a Holy Thing



Today, in the scriptural story of Sarah and Abraham,  
Sarah laughs.

Sarah Laughs.

You know, the author Madeleine L'Engle once wrote: “A good laugh heals a lot of hurts.” -

Writer and scholar Jean Houston said: “At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities.” –

Somewhere between the two lies our story for today.

But first,. Let me back up a bit.

First of all, Happy Father's Day. Today we remember and give thanks for those who were life-giving models of fatherhood to us: in many cases, the men who raised us; in other cases, those who came into our lives in different ways and who filled that role and fulfilled that relationship for us. And for those of us whose fathers have long since passed, today I wish for us all, that all our memories might rest easy upon our hearts.

This morning, lets do something a bit different. Usually, during this time we discuss the Gospel reading, but this morning I invite us to focus our attention on the first reading, from the Hebrew Scripture Book of Genesis.

The lectionary, that three-year cycle of bible passages that appointed for each Sunday, uses the story this morning as little more than a skipping stone between more memorable milestones in the passage. In the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, right before today's passage in chapter 18, God makes God's covenant with Abraham: Promising that Abraham will be a father of many nations, with descendants as numerous as the stars.

But today's passage comes some twenty-five years later. In the intervening time, Abraham has had a son Ismael, with Hagar, but Sarai has waited. Today, she is told by mysterious heavenly visitors that she will bear a child in her advanced years,

And then, the lectionary quickly skips ahead to Genesis chapter 21 and the birth of that son, Isaac, through whom God's promises will come to be fulfilled.

**In between, Sarah laughs.**

"Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh;" for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

**Oh yes, Sarah laughs.** And there are multitudes contained in that laugh. Multitudes: of pain, of persistence, of more than twenty-five years of fertility struggles in a culture that placed all the burden for fertility on women. And cultures that shamed them for the absence of children.

In that laugh, I hear *the rest of the story*. The story we have silenced. The story the lectionary has erased, on its way to what we often think of as "more important things."

But before we get into that, let us do a little skipping around of our own. Curiously enough, this story comes to us on the secular holiday of Father's Day, the counterpart to Mother's Day, which we just celebrated a short time ago.

Every year, Mother's Day, and, oddly enough, to a lesser degree, Father's Day, presents pastors and preachers with an almost unsolvable dilemma. The culture, (and billions of dollars of marketing muscle) focusses our attention on those who are mothers and fathers: how to remember them, how to celebrate them, and of course, what objects to purchase for them on "their day."

What is often left unsaid is what every pastor knows: this is the single most painful day in the year for about 10-15% of our folks, who have struggled with infertility. All too often, we address the 85 or 90%, and only fleetingly acknowledge the rest. Left alone long enough, this can become the proverbial "elephant in the room." So, let's address that.

First, some facts:

Infertility directly impacts 15% of our couples, but it is still often hidden in silence, and even shame.<sup>1</sup> Fertility, in our culture, is seen as a "woman's problem," even though in only 30% of cases is the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://resolve.org/>

underlying medical issue that of the woman alone. 30% of fertility issues can be traced back to an underlying medical issue for the male partner, 30 % is some overlap of medical conditions of both the woman and the man, and 10% is of unknown origin.<sup>2</sup>

It affects 48.5 million couples worldwide. Using our parish membership numbers as a guide, and assuming we are statistically representative of the whole, over 90 couples in the St. Mary's family has lived through periods of challenge and often heartbreak because of the difficulties of conceiving and carrying a child to term.

This past week, I was called to the hospital to grieve and support a young woman who lost her unborn child at 16 weeks. It is the second such son she and her partner have lost in the last three years.

The good news is that for most couples suffering a first miscarriage, 60% of women will go on to have a subsequent successful birth without further intervention.<sup>3</sup>

But for 87% of those couples with persistent fertility challenges, they will experience the anxiety and grief of loss, or of the difficulty in conceiving or carrying a child to term, and 41% will go through the depths of depression in their journey to healing.<sup>4</sup>

For women, this loss can be overwhelming, and the temptation to confuse one's medical condition with one's own being or self can be staggering and oppressive. We echo this in our choice of language.

Regardless of the underlying medical situation, men often walk this path seemingly isolated and alone – they suffer this loss in silence, unable or unwilling to even discuss this with the doctor, their spouse or partner, family, or even other men.

For many men of a certain generation, they are socialized from their earliest years to believe they should be able to “fix things,” and this is often not easily “fixable.”

About 12% of ALL couples, and the vast majority of those struggling with fertility challenges, have used some form of a fertility service, such as IVF. The average cost of IVF is between \$40 and \$60 thousand dollars, with 85% of which “out of pocket,” or not covered by insurance.

These pressures to conceive, often from uninformed family and friends, adds to the immense financial pressures which often have significant effects of the relationships. Without adequate support, these couples go on to have a higher rate of divorce and relationship breakdown.

There is a distinct phase in the healing journey for these couples that infertility support staff call “the resolution period.” For those single persons or couples who are unable to conceive and carry a child to term, this is the period of letting go of the pressure, the invasive procedures, the period where it feels

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fertilityanswers.com/13-stats-know-infertility/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.singlecare.com/blog/news/infertility-statistics/>

like medical interventions have come uninvited into your bedroom, along with the well-meaning but difficult comments and “advice” from friends and family, and the relentless pressure, anxiety, and stress.

And so, we laugh, an anxious laugh. And in that laugh the universe is flung into “a kaleidoscope of new possibilities.” For many singles or couples, “resolution” is the path to reimagining one’s lives filled with joy and happiness, for some to the journey of adoption or alternate forms of parenting, and for many the path to recognizing the thousands of amazing, beautiful, and life-giving ways in which life can be lived without children that you yourself brought into this world. It is a time of re-imagining - our culture’s perhaps well-meaning but misplaced emphasis on child-birth obscures the endless ways of equal and even greater joy that lies before us: as though living without children as if it is some kind of new and undiscovered country.

And for those still very much in the midst of the daily struggle, know that God struggles with you. Our heartbreak is God’s heartbreak. In Matthew 11:28 it is written: <sup>28</sup> *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

God sees you. God loves you. God is not as careless or disinterested as the lectionary sometimes makes it seem. To you, we, your church family, apologize for the many times we have conspired with the silence surrounding these difficult things. We repent of the times we have been thoughtless in our words and celebrations.

Today, in the Scriptures, upon hearing three mysterious men announce that she will give birth after a lifetime of pain and patience, she laughs. Sarah Laughs.

I wasn’t there to hear that laugh. But I have heard other laughter.

It could be a laugh of bitterness. It could be a laugh of brokenness. It could be a laugh of pain.

It could be a LAUGH OF JOY, equal parts hope and tears.

I don’t know. But I do know this: It was a **sacred laugh**.

Even the mysterious heavenly visitors, perhaps God’s own Self, does not let it slip by unnoticed or unacknowledged.

The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh;” for she was afraid. The Lord said “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

Sarah laughed. Sarah laughed for all of us who have faced seemingly endless pain, struggle, and hardship. She laughed for the promise that life can be lived in a thousand of joyous and life-giving ways, both child-filled and child-free. She laughed for the fractured faith within.

Sarah laughed for the fundamental unfairness of life.

Sarah laughed for the promise of tomorrow and the bruised and battered hope that sustains us all.

Sarah laughed. And that laugh was heard by God.

And that laugh mattered.

And that laugh was a holy thing. Amen.

## Scriptures Appointed for This Day

### The Collect

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

### Hebrew Scriptures - Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I

indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh;" for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

[The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."]

## The Psalm - Psalm 100

1 Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands; \*  
serve the Lord with gladness  
and come before his presence with a song.

2 Know this: The Lord himself is God; \*  
he himself has made us, and we are his;  
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

3 Enter his gates with thanksgiving;  
go into his courts with praise; \*  
give thanks to him and call upon his Name.

4 For the Lord is good;  
his mercy is everlasting; \*  
and his faithfulness endures from age to age.

## The Epistle - Romans 5:1-8

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

## The Gospel - Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

[Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."]

## Songfile / Playlist:

### Laughter, by Bruce Cockburn

A laugh for the way my life has gone  
 A laugh for the love of a friend  
 A laugh for the fools in the eyes of the world  
 The love that will never end

[Chorus]

Ha ha ha  
 Ha ha ha ha  
 Whoa Ha ha ha ha

Let's hear a laugh for the man of the world  
 Who thinks he can make things work  
 Tried to build the New Jerusalem  
 And ended up with New York

A laugh for the sun red-balling  
 Through the thermal inversion haze  
 A laugh for the nuclear good-time boys  
 Numbering all our days

A laugh for the newsprint nightmare  
 A world that never was  
 Where the questions are all "Why?"  
 And the answers are all "Because"

A laugh for the dogs barking at our heels  
 They don't know where we've been  
 A laugh for the dirty window pane  
 Hiding the love within

Tapping our feet to an ancient tune  
 A laugh for the time gone by  
 A laugh for me and Kitty in the delivery  
 room  
 Waiting for the child's first cry

Ha ha ha  
 Ha ha ha ha  
 Whoa  
 Ha ha ha ha

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB5ChrBhpN4>

