

Sarah laughed – Sermon on Genesis 18:1-15

...there is laughter beyond the veil,
life after death,
a child after decades of infertility,
a future after disappointment and frustration,
and a new land for those without a place to stay...

This, sisters and brothers, is my summing-up of Sarah, one of the mothers of faith, and her ancient story among the so-called patriarchal narratives of the people of Israel.

I assume we know quite a bit of the life story of Abraham especially, whereas there are many parts of the life of Sarah, his wife, which we can only guess at or imagine...

Abraham, and with him Sarah, come into view when Abraham is called by God to leave their home and family in Ur in Chaldea.

Full of hope and expectations of a better life, they set off to find the new land and found the family God had promised to them.

Sarah had no idea where she was going.

She just followed Abraham, put all her trust in him & his God.

But years went by and there wasn't the least sign of children, these descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky...

Sarah's hope diminished as her disgrace at being childless grew.

Sarah, being a woman, didn't have much say anyway.

Her value depended on how many sons she would be able to bear for her husband... that was their insurance for their old age, their pension, their hedge for the future, for the continued existence of them and their family.

Being barren in those days was always seen as the woman's fault.

The woman was to blame.

She had to suffer the disgrace, the curious looks and questions, the expectations and the pressure of family and society, and often repudiation by her husband.

Men had the right to send their wives away if they didn't give birth to children - had the right to marry another or a second wife and have children with her.

Sarah's hope had come to an end long before this.

"...it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women", the Bible frankly reports.

She'd stopped bleeding...

And maybe, maybe just for a few odd days then, she'd again hoped that that could be the long-desired pregnancy.

But then shortly after, it was clear:

Sarah would never have a child of her own.

She was then clearly and indubitably too old.

She might sometimes have wondered whether all the hopes and visions they'd had, would turn out to be just foolish ideas ...

Were all the efforts they'd made in vain? and the hardships they'd gone through on this journey that often looked as if it'd never end...?

At this stage they had just stopped by the oaks of Mamre for a couple of days to take a break.

God appeared again to Abraham, but this time in disguise.

"Abraham sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him."

It is God in front of Abraham – the Hebrew Bible immediately makes that clear. But what Abraham sees is "three men".

It was only much later that Abraham realised who he was talking to...

Abraham greets the three men with supreme courtesy.

He runs to meet them, he bows low to the ground.

He addresses one of them as "My Lord", he refers to himself twice as their servant, and he urges them to stop and rest, while he fetched water and bread.... hustle and bustle, if you like:

Abraham rushes into the tent to find Sarah.

"Quick! Three measures of best flour! Knead it and make cakes!" ...breathless orders given to Sarah, whereas he'd been so formal and polite with the strangers.

Sarah is treated just like the slave who has to prepare the rest of the meal, and roast the calf that Abraham chooses from his herd.

Like the slave, Sarah does not speak. She remains on the outskirts of the action, hidden from the view of the men, as tradition dictated.

So far, so good?

Then suddenly the conversation becomes mysterious...

"Where is your wife Sarah?" one of the men asks.

How do they know her name?

Since we know the three are God, we know why..., but Abraham couldn't possibly know at this point. Nevertheless he doesn't seem surprised at all ?

"There in the tent", he says, not wondering why his guests should inquire after his wife. No one in these narratives had asked about her before...

Now at least we – the readers of the story – begin to think that Sarah might be closer to the centre of the story than many would have thought, even though we cannot see her, hidden away as she is in the tent...

Has God come about Sarah this time?

This God had paid Abraham so much attention...

Is he now turning his eyes to Sarah?

"I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah will have a son," God – as one of the three – says; and the spotlight swings round, and for the first time Sarah is caught in its beam.

“And Sarah was listening at the entrance behind him.
Now they were old, advanced in age, it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women...
So Sarah laughed to herself...”
Sarah had heard everything.
What else could she do but laugh?
Cry out? Argue?
How could she do then what she’d never done all her life?!
“Worn out as I am,” the Bible has Sarah say...

Sarah had been waiting years and years to hear this news.
And even now she has to overhear it.
It’s only by accident that she learns that she will finally have the long desired baby...
that she has her own contribution to make to this whole story.

Her laughter is understandable.
Sarah is past the menopause.
The Bible gives a fairly broad hint that Abraham and Sarah’s physical relationship –
and perhaps more ?! - was ancient history.
And it simply asks, if anything is too wonderful for God...?
Where is their faith... their trust in God, in the working of miracles, including a
renewed relationship between these two who have lived beside each other for so
long already?
Have all their senses hardened and their hopes vanished in the decades of demands
and disappointments?

And then all of a sudden Sarah is all ears, when she hears one of the men say: “Why
did Sarah laugh?”
How could he have known her thoughts?
Who were those men?
Why did they know them? Their names? The name of their God?

And then Sarah brings herself out into the open.
“I did not laugh,” she says, for she was afraid.
And the man simply responds: “Oh yes, you did laugh.”
He doesn’t tell her off.
He doesn’t blame her for having tried to hide her reaction.
He only confirms that she has laughed.

Sarah tries to withdraw her laughter, but God is not having that!
The son who is to be born to Sarah will be called Isaac – which is Hebrew for “God
laughs”.
Laughter must be born.
Laughter cannot be denied; after all it will change Sarah’s whole life.

This is a very old story.
Many preachers never used to think it worth preaching about:
But if we look at it carefully and with all our curiosity and attention...

we will discover that this little story is a gem – a treasure to help us in our lives.

This miracle at the oaks of Mamre brought Sarah from despairing to hoping, and from hardening to a laughing that can liberate and set people free. In Sarah's story we can see God's friendliness, even though the reality of our world often denies God's presence. That alone makes the story worth telling.

Right from the beginning it looked as if the content of God's promises would never come to fulfilment: the hope for peace, justice, humanity, solidarity... for many people on this earth it is a dream that doesn't seem to come true... just as Sarah's child seemed never to be born...

But: the miracle that happened to Sarah has happened over and over again... and it still happens today.

God wants to come to his people, and change the most desperate life story into a future with hope.

God wants to come to those who suffer physical restrictions, emotional pain and other problems.

He wants to be with those oppressed by actual or verbal violence, by discrimination, disadvantage or unfair social structures.

He is at the side of those who are in fear, hurt and aching, humiliated and discouraged.

God calls us all, invites us into his kingdom and sets us free to experience the miracle of life...

a dream coming unexpectedly true...

a friendship growing...

a relationship healing...

understanding & liberation dawning ...

love to be found...

a new perspective for life on the horizon...

a place that feels like home...

justice in a place of violence and war...

peace on earth...

and God knows what else ...

Sarah laughed - in the end.

And so did God. God made Sarah laugh...

And as Sarah called her child Isaac – "God laughs",
I wish us all many, many experiences which we can call Isaac.
God will eventually laugh in our lives, too,
no matter what they look and feel like at the moment.
Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God,
Sarah laughed long ago.
You made her laugh.
You showed her
that there is no distance between her and you.
Please, God,
make us laugh, too.
Come close to us,
and let us see your miracles
in our lives.
Amen.