

Sarah’s Laugh: A Brief Meditation following an immersive, multi-generational congregational storytelling of Genesis 18.

For the last several Sundays in our Genesis Journeys series, we have been focused on Abraham and his family as they journeyed to a land that God would show them. They walked, as pilgrims, headed towards a promise. Admittedly, on these journeys we have focused quite a bit on Abraham, the man of the story—we’ve focused on his visions of God, his covenant with God, and the promise as it relates to him. For this Sunday and next Sunday, we are going to be focusing more on the important, and all too often overlooked and unheard women in these stories. These Genesis Journeys that God called God’s people on were full of promise, yes, but they also involved many dangers, especially for the women involved. Often these dangers were made more acute because of the unfair patriarchal system that the women lived under—a system in which men held all too much power over their life, well-being, and personhood.

Earlier in our Genesis Journeys, we heard of how Abraham lied to Pharaoh about Sarai being his sister. This lie put Sarah in a position to be exploited in Pharaoh’s house, all because Abraham looked to save his own skin. On top of it all, even when she was back with Abraham living in the land of Canaan, Sarah likely felt her identity and her relative social power diminished because she could not bear children for Abraham. Would God help her? Would God be the God only of Abraham only, or would he also be the God of Sarah too?

In a world where power is all too often concentrated in the hands of a privileged group, God's promise of blessing extending to all can seem unrealistic, even laughable. And yet, the biblical story suggests that it is just this "laughable promise" of God that God makes possible, in this case for Sarah. In her chapter "The Disposable Wife," in the book *Reading the Women of the Bible*, the late Jewish bible scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that despite all the ways that patriarchy threatened to permanently damage the family of God in these stories, God continually intervened in surprising ways on behalf of women like Sarah to restore them. When Sarah's exploitation in Egypt threatened, God sent plagues to Pharaoh's house to restore Sarah to her family; When Sarah's barrenness threatened her place in her family, God miraculously recreated her womb and changed her name to Sarah, a change that would indicate her own parallel status to Abraham, as one blessed to bring to birth a great nation.

In our story for today, a key moment is the moment where Sarah laughs. Sarah's laugh could be interpreted in any number of ways. Historically, the typical interpretation has depicted Sarah's laughter as one of unbelief and so a failure to trust in God's promise. While the text does say that when Sarah was found to have laughed she tried to deny it out of fear, what if we hear in Sarah's laughter, not a moment of unbelief but as a moment of her joy at the surprising act of God on her behalf? For all those times Sarah had been at the mercy of others what if we hear in her laughter a moment where she can reclaim her agency in the journey she has been on with Abraham? Sarah laughs because God yet again has shown that God is the God of Sarah too, the God of those pushed to the margins, the God of the oppressed. While next week's story of Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave girl, will make it clear for us that Sarah is not herself innocent when it comes to participating in systems of oppression, we can nonetheless hear in Sarah's laughter an

image of God's unending capacity to intervene for the disadvantaged, to surprise those of us who say "that's just the way it is," to challenge us with our tendency to limit God's blessing and provision. I like to imagine Sarah's laugh as laughing in the face of the false limits placed on her by the world she found herself in. Sarah's bold laughter is a powerful example. She gives birth to a holy laughter in the face of the false limits set by our world.

As we draw this stage of our Genesis Journeys to a close this morning, I encourage you to think of ways that God has surprised you in your life, ways that God has brought you to laughter, and ways that you have experienced God break through the false limits of our world, to bring new life. And, given that we are looking at the important women of these Genesis Journeys, I also encourage you to think of the important women in your lives, whose witness, power, and creativity have birthed life and blessing to those around them.