

Proper 11, Year C
July 22, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

And Sarah Laughed:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

“The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre” is how the story starts.

I wonder how Sarah might have started this story. Would she have started with the words, “the LORD appeared to Abraham” or would she have started in a different place?

Perhaps she would have started with the tent – the place of shelter from the mid-day heat, her place of retreat from the barbs and taunts a barren woman often gets. After all, it was there, in the tent, where she first heard the footfall on the path – pebbles and leaves crunching under the weight of someone’s feet. I bet she wondered why people were out in the heat of the day. Was she afraid or merely curious?

Abraham seemed unaware of the approaching strangers. Then quite suddenly he got up and ran towards them. Perhaps she asked herself, “What is Abraham doing running down the path? It’s hot, and he’s far too old to be running around like that.”

Sarah hears her husband invite the strangers to rest in the shade of their trees and then she hears him offer them refreshments. In her mind she’s wondering what have we to offer – going through the inventory she keeps in her head.

He’s running again. “What’s his hurry?” she wonders to herself. She hears him say, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” “Choice flour. Why does he want choice flour? Has he forgotten – we only use the choice flour for the bread we offer God?”

He’s off again. This time running towards the herd. Sarah sees her husband take a calf – a calf – and give it to his servant to prepare. A calf for three people? What is he thinking? A calf is for a crowd or a sacrifice to God.

She watches from her tent door as Abraham stands and serves the strangers. Then she hears the strangers say to Abraham, “Where is your wife Sarah?”

“How do they know my name?” she wondered to herself. “Why are they asking after me?” “What is it that they want with me?” I wonder if her heart began to pound with fear. I wonder if she thought, “No good can come of this.”

She hears one of the strangers say, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." I bet she did a double-take on that. I bet it took a moment to sink in. And then she laughed to herself.

What a laugh that must have been – a laugh of incredulity as she thought about her age. She'd spent years longing for a child. Now for one to come so out of season. That's laughable indeed.

What a laugh that was – a laugh that masked the pain of her life of barrenness. She'd spent years longing for release from the loneliness of that life. She'd spent years enduring the whispered taunts and furtive looks a barren one receives. Was there fear embedded in that laugh? She was, after all, a woman long past the years of bearing children. Women much younger than she have a hard time giving birth. Maybe there was fear for the child as well – fear that he might die in infancy, fear that he would one day find himself an orphan.

I think there was a measure of doubt included in that laugh. After all, Sarah's life had been full of disappointments. She had learned the look of straws and not to clutch at them.

What was it – what was it that made it so hard for Sarah to believe in the promise of God?

I think it was the barrenness. Barren ground is empty ground. Unfertile. Without the resources to sustain life.

That's the place Sarah was when the LORD came calling – a barren place. No wonder she found it hard to believe the promise of God.

No wonder she laughed. No wonder she lied about it afterwards when the LORD asked her why she laughed. She was afraid – afraid to trust, afraid to believe.

But ours is not a God to be daunted by our doubt or denials. Ours is a faithful God. Ours is a God of promise – even in the face of our doubt and denials.

When Sarah says to the LORD, "I did not laugh," the LORD replies, "Oh, yes, you did laugh."

Sarah's story doesn't end there. It continues. At due time she gives birth. She and Abraham name their child Isaac which means laughter. And Sarah says, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."

What a turn in events. What a great reversal.

Think of it—Sarah no longer laughing in nervousness or fear or shame but Sarah laughing with joy and naming her child for her laughter. That's a reversal of the first order! That's a reversal brought from God.

Ours is a God of great reversals. Ours is a God who brings new life to the barren ones. Ours is a God who lifts up the lowly. Ours is a God redeemed from the Cross. Ours is God in whom hope triumphs against the reason of the day.

Ours is a God who meets us in the barren places of our lives—our grief, our loneliness, our fear and stirs new life in us.

Ours is a God of promise—a promise to you, promise to me, promise to us. God offers to us the promise God offered Sarah—a promise to fill the barren places in our lives. We have only to let God into our tent.