

“Laughing all the way to the hospital”

Genesis 18:1-14, 21:1-6

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June 15, 2008

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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 difficult for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."

* * *

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. (Isaac means laughter.) 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."

Sarah Barnes writes for the Austin American Statesman. Or at least she used to. I haven't kept up with her since I moved from the Austin area, but there was a time several years ago I looked for her column with eager anticipation. Back in 2002 Sarah shared her personal journey with the reading public, a journey of the joys and difficulties, indeed the impossibilities, of raising a seriously handicapped child.

Sarah and Jim's daughter Meredith was born with a rare brain disorder that results in weak motor skills. When she was 1, she sat up. When she was 2, she crawled. At 3 and 4, she began to cruise along furniture and use a walker. Doctors told Sarah and Jim---Meredith would probably never walk independently. Doctors warned them not to hope for too much. Surely some thought it would be impossible.

One evening as they were getting ready for bed, five-year-old Meredith and her dad were sitting on the floor. Then she put her hands out in front of her and began to rise from a squatting position into a standing one. She had tried this often, but she had never quite made it to standing.

Then she stood! Her parents got in front of her and instinctively held out their arms. "Come on Meredith, you can do it. Take a step." Meredith smiled big. She paused to let her muscles consider what her brain was telling them to do. Then it happened. The moment that would forever be etched into her parents' minds. Meredith put her right foot forward. Then her left. Then her right. Then for the first time Meredith walked into her parents' arms and gave them a hug. But Meredith wasn't interested in savoring the moment. She was on the go.

Is anything impossible with God? Is anything too difficult for God? These are crucial questions. If we answer yes, well, there are those things that God just doesn't seem able to take care of. . . That leaves us with a very weak and impotent God. If we answer no, God can do anything, we still may find ourselves laughing in doubt at what can be imagined.

We are skeptical. We are rational. We are logical. For many of us, our rationality is a point of pride. And there's something about becoming adults, about getting older, some kind of tendency most of us have, to become more careful, to be more guarded, to close off possibilities. *No, that's not going to happen. Why even hope for a change? Nothing can be done. There's a limit to what we can do.* There are those things in the

world that God can do, and frankly, there are those things in the world God rarely does anything about, or so it seems.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we figure there are things in life that are simply impossible. Like Abraham and Sarah, sometimes we laugh at the possibility that God can breathe new life into old bones. We laugh with bitterness. We laugh with derision. Maybe sometimes we just laugh because the possibilities are so ludicrous, as they are in this story. *Are you kidding? Are you pulling my leg, God?*

There are so many who face barrenness and dead ends. I hear your stories. Nearly every one of us has a story. At least one; sometimes more than one. A marriage ended, addiction, crippling pain, a child in serious trouble, a psychiatric illness with no end in sight, a dead end job, a dead end diagnosis, a dead end hope. Because we believe there can be no significant change, we give up. And sometimes we give up on God.

And there is the barrenness we all experience sometimes even in the life of the church. I have overheard some things in my short six months here. *We can't change the way we've always done that. No one will want to volunteer for that. That's the way it's always been around here. Nobody's ever really been supportive of a mission trip. People in this congregation can't give or do or be any more than they already have. They're worn out. They've already been there, done that. He or she wouldn't possibly consider serving again. . .*

I've been standing behind a tent flap, listening carefully.

But, thanks be to God, there also many here who don't accept this. They are God's messengers. Some you would expect. Some you can identify easily. Others are a lot more quiet about it. Stealth messengers. They just pick up their feet and go, one foot after the other. Unstoppable.

They are like unknown beings who come to us, and we welcome them, not really knowing what to expect. They challenge us to consider things that may have seemed completely impossible. They give us a vision of growth and renewal and energy that may be unsettling for Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church. We may even be tempted, at times, to laugh at them.

But we need to be careful about our laughter. Because we just might discover who we are laughing at. There is a spirit brewing, a spirit of risk and a spirit of giving and a spirit of opportunity that can only be

God. God's grace and God's power to bring God's newness into the dead endings in our lives and into the comfortable complacency of our church.

There is a beautiful end to the story about Meredith walking, an ending that is especially appropriate to note here on Father's Day. Here's how Sarah (her mother) tells it. "When Meredith finally got to bed, Jim and I were still savoring the moment when Jim announced he had a surprise for me. I couldn't imagine an evening filled with any more magic, but he emerged with a tiny sack."

"Open your hand," he said.

Cupping his hand under mine, he tipped the sack and a tiny pair of gold shoes slid gently into my palm. "I've been waiting two years to give this to you---on the day when Meredith walked."¹

Sarah didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

Waiting for God's surprises takes time and patience and openness to risk. It takes prayer and planning and listening and being still. It takes creativity and challenge. This summer you will hear a sermon series on growth and transformation. It will be the focus of a Leaders' Retreat in July. You will be asked to be in prayer for the vision, growth, and future of Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church. We can do this. We can do this because God promises us the grace to sustain us and to give us new vision even and especially when we feel our eyes have grown dim. Even and especially when there seems to be no way. The African American church is fond of saying, "God made a way out of no way". God did it with Sarah. God did it with Sarah Barnes' daughter. God can do it with us. Nothing is impossible with God.

Sarah's laughter turns from the skeptical to the celebratory, as she and Abraham find themselves laughing all the way to the hospital. They name their baby boy Isaac, but at home they call him "Giggles".

¹ "One giant leap for 5-year-old Meredith" by Sarah Barnes, [Austin American-Statesman](#), 7/25/2002.