



Unraveling: Abraham and Sarah
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This week, we begin our “Unraveled” worship series. Ten weeks with 10 different stories from the Bible that explore times when lives became unraveled.

The stories that we will be journeying with over the next 10 weeks contain the whole spectrum of human emotion - from the depths of despair and grief to the euphoria of laughter (and everything else in between). These stories are our stories. The truth we will find in them reflects the truth of our own lives in our own times.

Unraveling happens in many ways. Sometimes, we are unraveled by external forces...take the COVID-19 virus for example or natural disasters. Sometimes we are unraveled by violence and injustice, sometimes we are unraveled by shame and greed. Sometimes, we unravel ourselves. Sometimes we allow ourselves to come unraveled by what we have done or by what we have left undone. And, sometimes, *God* is the great “unraveler” - coming into the status quo of our lives and shaking things up in ways that seem mysterious, unsettling, and maybe just plain bizarre.

Our first “unraveled” story comes to us from the Book of Genesis, through the story of a not-so-young couple named Sarah and Abraham. For no reason other than because God simply wanted to, God has chosen Sarah and Abraham to be the parents of God’s people. God has promised that their offspring will outnumber the stars in the sky.

There is only one problem. Decades have passed and no children have come their way. And, to rub salt in the wound, God has changed both of their names in some truly ironic ways. The husband has been called Abram, which means father. He is now called Abraham, which means father of many. The wife has been called Sarai, which means princess. She is now called Sarah, which means mother. Only, she isn't a mother. And he is father to only one son called Ishmael that he fathered with one of Sarah's slaves, Hagar.

And some of you may remember that *that* situation doesn't end up very well for anyone involved!

But let's not get distracted...that's another fascinating story for another time....

So here they are. A 100 year old man called "father of many" and a 90 year old woman called "mother," with no children between them. They seem to have accepted their fate. They seem to have given into the fact that this God of theirs seems to be all talk and no results.

But all that will change with a divine proclamation and some initial snide laughter.

Just before today's passage, Abraham has an encounter with God.

"God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you will no longer call her Sarai. Her name will now be Sarah. I will bless her and even give you a son from her. I will bless her so that she will become nations, and kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham fell on his face and laughed. He said to himself, can a 100-year-old man become a father, or Sarah, a 90-year-old woman, have a child? To God Abraham said, "If only you would accept

Ishmael!" But God said, "No, your wife Sarah will give birth to a son for you, and you will name him Isaac."

God renews God's promise to Abraham and he literally falls on the floor laughing. Clutching his side, tears streaming down his cheeks, his face turning red, Abraham laughs. It's just too absurd. It's been too many years. That ship has sailed. He is thinking that to accept this news will only set himself up for more disappointment. Sometimes, after many "no's," you're just not able to believe the "yes" when it comes your way. So, Abraham, he laughs.

A few days later we learn that Abraham and Sarah are having a quiet evening enjoying the cooling temperatures after another warm day. Has Abraham told Sarah about what God had shared with him? We aren't told. But what we do know is that God shows up in the form of three visitors and the same divine proclamation is given. The 100 year old man and the 90 year old woman will conceive.

In the twenty-four years since God first promised to give these two childless senior citizens a son, the wait has been purifying and shaping Abram and Sarai into Abraham and Sarah. Remember, at least as important as the thing we wait for is what we become as we wait. Faith and character are forged in the waiting. So can also a sense of humor.

It's Abraham, not Abram, we see sitting drowsily at the entrance to his tent. He is nodding off to sleep when out of the corner of his eye he sees three shadows standing nearby. They seem to have appeared out of nowhere, and something strange stirs deep inside Abraham when he sees them, something like fear, but not quite. It's more like excitement and anticipation.

He rises immediately, his head suddenly clear, and rushes over to where they stand. Hospitality is a sacred duty for the Bedouin, so he bows low before them and speaks to the one who seems to be their leader:

“If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.”

When they agree to stay and accept his hospitality, he hurries into the tent and says to his wife, Sarah, “Quick, get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.” He then runs out to his herd, picks out one of his best, most tender calves and orders a servant to slaughter it and cook it. He then brings some curds and milk for his guests to enjoy as they wait for the bread and meat to cook.

The three messengers eat silently for a while as Abraham stands watching them, trying to understand the feeling he has in their presence. Then they speak, asking him where his wife, Sarah, is. Abraham says, “There, in the tent.” Then the leader speaks, and Abraham knows the reason for his butterflies; this is the One he heard speak to him the year before, but had not seen. This is the One who promised him and Sarah a son. This is the Lord! Then the LORD said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.’

As they eat, Sarah, is sitting on the floor near the entrance of the tent. She hears one of the messengers say, “Sarah your wife will have a son,” and she tries to stifle her reaction. She has heard this story before too; for the last twenty-four years, to be exact.

But now she is in her nineties, and Abraham is nearly one hundred years old. She has long since given up hope. It hurt for a while to wait and not to receive. Then the hurt turned to anger, and the anger to resignation. She is surprised at what she feels now. When she hears that seemingly renewed empty promise again, it strikes her as...well, *funny!*

Sarah laughs to herself as she thinks, 'After I am worn out and my master is old?' She is still holding her hand over her mouth when the messenger talking to her husband speaks again. She might not have heard him had he not used her name again. The messenger says, "Why does Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'" And before she can move away to the back of the tent, the messenger continues: "Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

This messenger has heard her thoughts! Mystified at what is happening, she exclaims from inside the tent, "I did not laugh." Without even turning in her direction, the stranger says back to her, "Yes, you did laugh."

The most important phrase in this exchange between the messenger and Sarah is the messenger's question back to Sarah. Sarah scoffs a question: "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" The messenger chooses to ask her a question in return: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Sarah, probably made cynical by the passing years, frustrated by God's seemingly unkept promises, afraid to start to hope again, clearly thinks that there are plenty of things too wonderful for the Lord. At this point in the story, I like to imagine that the Lord is wearing a tooth-filled grin on his face!

It is a hard thing to believe in a promise – to live by it, day after day, to see it in the night sky and hear it your name and see it again in your lover’s eyes. It is a hard thing, to believe in a promise with no power to make it true. Everything is future tense – and in the meantime what is there to live on now?

And yet. What better way to live than in the grip of a promise, and a divine one at that? To wake every morning to the possibility that today may be the day. To remain awake all day long, noticing everything – the shade of the olive trees, the way the wind blows the dust around on the ground and the smell of the grass when the sun heats up the fields. To search the face of every stranger in case it turns out to be an angel from God.

To live like this is to discover that the blessing is not the future but now. The promise may not be fully in hand. It may still be on the way, but to live deliberately, and fully awake –that is what it means to live in the promise.

All it takes are a few regular reminders, because as long as the promise is renewed, the promise is alive, as vivid as a rainbow, as real as the stars in the sky.

So, let us fast forward nine months and, behold, a child is born. And Sarah laughs again. But this laughter is a much different kind of laughter. Not a snide-type of laughter. But a joyous laughter. A kind of laugh that can only be laughed when God has done something truly unexplainable, something truly remarkable. At the end of today’s story, everyone is named *very* appropriately. The father is named “father.” The mother is named “mother.” And the son is named, Isaac, which, of course, means “laughter.”

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann says the following of today’s passage: “Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained. The newness is sheer gift - underived, unwarranted.” Sarah laughs

because just when she thought her life had become unraveled to the point of no return, God knits her back together in a way that she could never have foreseen.

Maybe you have not had much to be joyful about these last few months; or have had a reason to burst out in laughter!

Let this story from God be a gift to you – that even as we walk the uncertainty of these days –God’s promise is still alive and well! That even in the midst of these unraveled times – there is holy joy and sacred surprise all around us!

Sarah’s laughter is the laughter that is laughed when someone who has experienced trauma finds joy again—like the joyous tears of those who have been reconnected with a lost loved one or beloved pet during the ravages of fire and hurricanes! That reconnection bringing thankful laughs, tears of joy and smiles; a soothing balm to all when so much destruction surrounds them!

Sarah’s laughter is the laughter that is laughed when someone who has been seriously ill recovers their health and is able to do something they haven’t been able to do during their illness. The sheer joy and excitement of the ‘doing again’ is one to behold! Sarah’s laughter is the laughter that is laughed when we chuckle at the antics of the birds around the bird bath and bird feeder. Sarah’s laughter is the laughter that is laughed when one of our children or grandchildren does something startlingly unexpected during a face time or Zoom call! Sarah’s laughter is the laughter that is laughed when we can chuckle at the absurdity of our situation – I think of a few of the cartoons and captions that Sarah Belinski has shared with us through her “Staying Connected” newsletter – I know I have chuckled out-loud a time or two!

Friends, laughter is a necessary gift on this difficult journey of life. Laughter is a healthy antidote to the heaviness of this world. And in addition to being good for the soul, it's good for the body as well! It increases your blood flow, boosts your immune system, and releases endorphins in your brain that gives you a natural high! And it doesn't cost a thing!

So, laugh, church! Laugh at yourselves. Laugh until it brings tears to your eyes! Laugh at that funny TV show that you love. Laugh at your favorite comic strip or captions. Laugh at the expected joys and surprises. Be on the lookout for joy when it comes creeping in when you least expect it. Be practitioners of giggles. Connoisseurs of hilarity. Devotees of joy in strong supply.

When things come unraveled, fear not, for God's ability to do a new thing is stronger than whatever is causing the unraveling.

So let us join Abraham and Sarah and laugh out loud in joy!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.