

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
Proper 6, Year A  
June 18, 2017

I remember the moment like it was yesterday. I was sitting in this amazing French café on the corner by The General Theological Seminary, in Chelsea, NY, where I met Betsy Ivey for the first time, to explore whether it would be a good fit for all of us if she came to St. Andrew's to be our curate. And then something marvelous, life-giving, and true happened. We burst out laughing so loudly, in exactly the same way, and at exactly the same time, that we knew in that moment the answer was yes, we did indeed need to do ministry together. There was something electric and alive, for somehow the Spirit had joined us together, and we were off on an incredible journey of recognizing and living into the spark of something within us that connected us to the joy of living in Christ. The laughter we shared in that moment and many more moments to come was indeed holy laughter. The old adage that "Laughter is the best medicine" is entirely true, I believe, for shared laughter can draw people together, smooth out difficult spots in a relationship, and create instant bonds among diverse people. We can laugh 'til we cry and sometimes we laugh instead of crying, for this exuberant action can release all sorts of emotions. I was reminded while reflecting on laughter this week of the glorious song in Mary Poppins when Uncle Albert is floating up against the ceiling singing, "I love to laugh", long and loud and clear. I love to laugh, it's getting worse every year!" He goes on to sing, "The more I laugh, the more I fill with glee, and the more the glee, the more I'm a merrier me, it's embarrassing, the more I'm a merrier me". Mary Poppins joins in to sing about different kinds of laughter, "Some who laugh through their noses ... and others who laugh through their teeth, for goodness sake, hissing and fizzing like snakes".

Our story in Genesis this morning pivots on Sarah's laugh. At this point in the story, the focus has shifted from Abraham to Sarah, and from the ordinary to the extraordinary, for we are aware that the visitors are not mere strangers, but actually divine beings, perhaps YHWH himself, for how would mere strangers know her name? When one of the visitors proclaims that, when they return in the spring, the time of new life, she will have borne a son. And Sarah laughs, I imagine, long and loud and clear, just like Mother Betsy and I did, just like Uncle Albert did, floating on the ceiling in his merriment.

But why do you think she laughed? Perhaps there are a number of reasons, for laughter can portray a number of different emotions, which we may share too, as we encounter God's preposterous plan for us.

On the positive side, her laughter could represent complete joy. If so, I bet there were some giggles happening too, and maybe some jumping up and down as well. This joyful laughter happens to us when we see that God has not forgotten us or God's promises to us. This happened to me shortly after my mother died and I felt so drawn to be in the woods. I realized that it was God pulling me there to be healed. I was giddy that God still cared, that God still looked for ways to comfort me, that God was again birthing me into a new understanding of

the presence and mystery of God. I don't know if I jumped up and down or not, but I do remember the complete joy in my heart of being remembered by God. Joy has a way of producing giggles, and that's one kind of laughter I can imagine from Sarah, as she eavesdropped upon the conversation from behind the corner of the tent.

However, I can also imagine a laughter that blurts from her mouth to hide the red flush of embarrassment she was feeling, for the knowledge that God would fulfill the promise of a child certainly highlighted the fact that she had long ago given up on believing it would happen. She and Abraham had been unfaithful to God's promise of a child born of their marriage. Sarah couldn't wait long enough. Sarah had taken the matter into her own hands, offered her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham, and his first offspring was not from her womb, as God had promised. Perhaps she was embarrassed, ashamed, that she hadn't lingered long enough until the blessing was extended by God. Maybe she regrets not waiting patiently upon the Lord, for the offspring of Ishmael continued to cause problems in the relationships among Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. I imagine all of us have had times like this, when we realize we just should have waited for God, for what God would have given us would have been infinitely better than the mess we created ourselves, when we gave up on God, jumped right in, took the matter into our own hands, made it happen in the timeline we set forth, and then had some regrets.

Laughter can mask all sorts of hard emotions: shame or embarrassment, and also injury. Maybe the words of the visitor stung her deep inside, broke her heart once again, his words awakening in her the passionate yearning she had for her own baby, and it seemed like the visitor's words were mocking her, for she was 90 years old and knew that she could no longer bear children. How often do we hear God's call and almost wish we didn't, for once awakened, we know we must respond, and sometimes that just doesn't seem possible? We almost wish the yearning had not been placed in our heart, when we don't think we can give it birth.

Sarah's laughter could have expressed joyful glee, deep despair, anger and injury, or embarrassment for not waiting patiently upon the Lord, those words echoing in her heart from hearing the words of Isaiah so many times as the family gathered around the fire at night.

It was hard for Sarah to wait patiently upon the Lord. She had passed childbearing age and with that, her hopes must have fled. We can find it hard to wait patiently upon the Lord too, particularly in our Western culture where everything seems to move at the speed of light and everything is seemingly instantly available to us at the touch of our fingers on our computer keyboards. It's hard sometimes not to drift into apathy, when it appears to us that God has forgotten us, or God's timetable is taking too long for our comfort. We may find we no longer care whether God shows up or not or that we've lost imagination of what God desires to give birth to in us. We can fall into despair, when our hearts release the joyful anticipation of all that God has promised us: life abundant.

In order to "wait patiently upon the Lord", I believe there are two things we need to do: first, believe that God is sovereign over all things, even our lives, and this means even, or

particularly, in those moments when God's promise to us appears to be most in peril, God is still in charge and will step forward to fulfill the promise.

And second, we need to have hope, and this brings us into conversation with Paul's letter, a portion of which we read today, wherein he says a lot about hope. To me, the most powerful message he offers us is that hope can be strengthened by human experience but it is ultimately a gift from God. Paul goes on to infer that hope is actually an abbreviation for the future life with God, when all things which matter to us are restored. Paul makes it clear that God extends this salvation, this saving grace of hope to us, even when we are too weak to reach for it. Even in Sarah's weakness of disbelief, God showed up and gave her new life. Our role is to live in a state of waiting in hope. This intentional practice of resting in the knowledge that God is active in our lives, of opening the eyes of our hearts to see God's movement, and of responding with gratitude is also what builds trust, transmits love, and restores our world.

When I was a young girl, my friend and I spent an afternoon a week after school tutoring young children in a Head Start Program. I learned something very important from that experience: what mattered most to the young children, especially this one darling little boy named Dwight, was that I showed up each week with worksheets prepared with their names written on the top of the page, an easy thing to do, but something that meant the world to him. He joyfully dove into the worksheets with wild abandon, because he felt remembered, because he knew I had gone before him in thought and care, because he could trust, with joyful anticipation, that I would show up for him. I still remember this little boy, and the look in his eyes, and the smile of his face, when he saw me pull out papers designed especially for him. I imagine his stance is the stance God desires for us: trusting and joyful anticipation that God has remembered us, that God will indeed show up and bring us exactly what is right for us, for grace goes before us and offers us love and care.

This grace, which helps us build trust with God, which instills within us a sense of hopefulness, which allows us to believe that not just the whole world is in God's hand, but also our individual lives, meets us each time we receive the bread in our hands, each time our hearts get pulled into that place of peace that passes all understanding, each time we see a new beginning emerge from an ending, each time we celebrate the gift of the resurrection in our lives.

Sarah plays a very important role in our history of the movement of God among God's people: she is often called the mother of the Jewish people. It was Sarah's firstborn, not Abraham's firstborn who was chosen to carry on the covenant between God and God's people. Her legacy is one of humor, hospitality, and family and her life, although blessed, was not easy. For most of her married life, she was ridiculed and marginalized due to her barrenness, and then she bears a son, only to have Abraham take him up the mountain, in obedience to God's apparent command to sacrifice him. Sarah dies shortly thereafter from the shock of Abraham's actions. Surely that event would have tested her ability to trust in and wait patiently upon the Lord's promise to be fulfilled, for it could have been seen as though once again God's promise of Sarah being the mother of all nations was in great peril. She must have screamed from her heart, "But this isn't the way it's supposed to be!". She once again had to bow to God's sovereignty and

offer that which was most precious to her, her child, to God's care. Sarah's laughter can say to us that our relationship with God is complicated and complex at times and difficult to live into and yet Sarah's child shows us God's faithfulness to us, even in times of our utter unfaithfulness. Macrina Wiedekehr, in her book, *Seasons of Your Heart: Prayers and Reflections*, speaks of hope as being confident waiting, and she says our lives are empty without it. She continues, "It is a small seed that grows wildly when it is nurtured. We cannot teach someone to hope. We give hope by living out of our own hope. We give hope by eagerly awaiting the blessings that have been promised us." Today, as we come forward to receive Holy Communion, let us stretch out our hands to receive that gift of hope, so that we too may wait patiently and in confidence for the blessings which God will give us. Amen.