

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.14.26

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

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 be fruitful?" 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 wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "Yes, you did laugh."

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. 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." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (484)

There was graffiti on the walls of Andover Hall, the main academic building of the Harvard Divinity School. Simple line drawings of scenes from the Bible, these appeared on the basement walls in 1957. Graduate student Laurence Scott sketched them there, so says an article in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin from May 1971: "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego [with wry, knowing smiles] as they sit calmly in the flames of the fiery furnace," "Absalom's face [in dismay] after [as Scripture tells us] 'his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went

away.” Here also we could “see how Haman slinks before Esther's upright figure and accusatory finger [or] Catch Sarah trying to hide her laughter at the idea of becoming a mother in her old age...”

Like all graffiti, the work is shrouded in some mystery, underappreciated for its never being fully authorized.

And now it's entirely gone. Andover Hall was fully renewed in 2019 and the line drawings are gone.

Which is unusual in this world, that something like that might be utterly gone. I mean, doesn't the internet make us remember everything? But the only trace of them I could find was but one of them imaged in the archived edition of that 1971 article. And it's unusual at a place like Harvard, with its 16 museums and 70 libraries. The retention of cultural output seems central to its mission.

It all makes me surprisingly sad. Why didn't someone at least take pictures of “these ‘modish murals,” so described in 1971? They'd thus far survived critique and also at least one act of proto-cancellation, someone throwing water at the image of Noah on his ark for the “the rather impious depiction,” which resembled to some “an illustration from a Dr. Seuss book.”

By contrast, they'd also enjoyed some surreptitious restoration, someone retracing the lines of Ruth and Naomi when they'd begun to fade, and the dean himself, Douglas Horton, caught once on a stepladder trying to clean off the smears the watery vandalism had caused for poor Noah (as if he hadn't weathered far worse).

(Not for nothing this same Douglas Horton would go on to donate the land in New Hampshire's White Mountains that would become the UCC summer camp where I'd decades later be a camper, and then a unit leader, and eventually a staff person. The Horton Center was my true seminary, so it seems right I would walk footsteps in another path Douglas Horton trod.)

A small confession: I knew nothing of these “modish murals” before I went in search of them online. Two years ago, Jack was studying the Book of Genesis in his Great Books course in college, and he was taken with the story of Sarah laughing. Texting about it, he and I had both been charmed by it, which is when I remembered that simple image of Sarah laughing that accompanied my every trip to my mailbox in the basement of Andover Hall. It

developed in my memory like a Polaroid and he wanted to see it, so I said I'd search the web and grab a screenshot of it.

But there was nothing of it on the web.

Incredulous that this is even a possibility in today's world, I thought I'd just get in my car and drive to Cambridge right that very day—and then I'd put them on the web. But then I discovered Andover Hall is now Swartz Hall, and is thus completely (and not unnecessarily, mind you) redone. I searched for images of the basement, and what came up weren't the catacombs of yesteryear but something much more polished.

But they must have taken "before" shots, I told myself, getting rather upset. There must be some pictorial record. This is Harvard, after all. They're all about this sort of thing.

But I couldn't find any.

So I called a couple offices there of people who still work in positions I knew them to have held. Could someone please go to the basement of Andover (now Swartz) Hall and please snap and text whatever you find?

I got Julie in Admissions and Financial Aid. "I don't think they're there anymore," she said, likely from her now elegant office. "I haven't seen them or noticed them. I think they're gone."

It was only then that I became aware of how Sarah had stayed with me, and not her as a biblical character but her as depicted in this modish mural, the red-line graffiti. Turns out, she'd been like a quiet, kind friend, a little impish, more than a little delighted, though I'm sure I had no idea why she was delighted. My ignorance of the Bible prior to divinity cannot be overstated so I'm sure Sarah was someone whose sketched face I knew even before I knew her Bible story. That said, a few semesters in, I wrote my longest exegesis on Sarah laughing, likely influenced by this sweet and I'd say entirely earnest and faithful depiction of her.

Sweetly, delightedly laughing.

At something that couldn't possibly happen...

But maybe...would happen? According to the promise? According to this oft repeated promise, but long delayed in its fulfillment. That she and Abraham would have a son, that she and Abraham would become the parents of a great nation, and that the world

they would make would become more abounding than there are stars in the night sky or grains of sand in the desert.

That's what God had said way back where this whole thing had started, that's what the Lord had said along the way from Haran to Shechem to Bethel, that's what these three strangers come slowly out of the wilderness would say now that these two were at last settled in Hebron by the oaks of Mamre. That's what they would say once Abraham had excitedly greeted them, and Sarah and her household had unhesitatingly prepared for them a feast.

A brief story lightly told, we should remember the slowness of it all, how much time this all would have taken. These three people (these three-in-one people?) taking shape on the horizon, wavy with heat from the land across the distance, moving patiently on foot, an appearance—or an apparition? for it could have been either.

Abraham sitting in his tent doorpost, in this final spot where he would put up his tent after years of journeying, taking his rest at the height of the day and in this late moment in his long life when the promise had continued to move them but it was now very, very long delayed, long deferred.

And we all know what happens when a dream is delayed, when a dream is deferred: it dries up like a raisin in the sun, it festers like a sore eventually to run.

Sarah has been accused of all sorts of faithlessness for her laughter. That hers was more scoff than laugh, that hers was more cynicism than delight. This one of very few mentions of laughter in all the Bible, she's practically unbiblical, so suggest the accusations. Why, I had to write a whole new hymn text to wedge it into our worship service today.

Not unrelated, laughter has itself been accused of all sorts of wickedness.

The most reductive thinkers among us suppose it as an evolutionary adaptation that no longer really serves. This was to tame the natural tendency toward aggression, the dangerous reaction to any strange sight or sound. Laughter is thought merely to diffuse what might otherwise be an occasion for jumping, bristling, fighting, or running. It's something secondary, so these suppose.

The thing is, there are examples of wild animals appearing to laugh—and when they're not in an encounter that could turn deadly. Nature photographers have caught them in moments of placidity and, it would seem, good humor.

Whatever. This reduction of what laughter is and what it might serve also has its philosophical side. Aristotle apparently thought laughter was related to ugliness and debasement, something serious folks would never do. Cicero held that “the province of the ridiculous lay in a certain baseness and deformity.” Thomas Hobbes wrote in 1651 that “The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others...” and in the 19th century, Alexander Bain, an early experimental psychologist, thought along the same lines, claiming that “Not in physical effects alone, but in everything where a man can achieve a stroke of superiority, in surpassing or discomforting a rival, is the disposition of laughter apparent.”

According to French philosopher Henri Bergson, “In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbor.” Sir Max Beerbohm, the 20th-century English wit, found “two elements in the public’s humor: delight in suffering and contempt for the unfamiliar.” The American psychologist William McDougall believed that “laughter has evolved in the human race as an antidote to sympathy, a protective reaction shielding us from the depressive influence of the shortcomings of our fellow men.”

These people—and I say this with all due respect—seem like jerks. I mean, laughter *can* be as dark and domineering a phenomenon as this, and it (I guess) was for them as individuals. But they’ve universalised something that might be theirs alone, something philosophers should always be on guard against doing. Because, in the case of laughter, this can also be the fruit of delight and of deep and loving relationship, of hope and joy.

I for one think I never laugh as much as I do when I’m with people I trust in a circumstance that feels good and, with an eye for the tragic and the woeful that ever exists, also submits to the enduring beauty and resilience and joy that ever persists and insists and blows through as on a late spring breeze, as ungovernable as the wind, as the sort of thing you can’t capture, can only best ride.

It’s not for nothing that Sarah and Abraham named the boy she would bear (spoiler alert!), “Isaac,” which means laughter. It’s not for nothing, and this has itself been supposed to be a nod back to the mistake she made in laughing at the improbability of a thing that

would actually come true. This is taken as a confession of sorts. Where once she denied her wrong, now in naming her son Isaac she confessed her wrong.

But I think you could just as easily understand their naming their son this as her recognizing that this moment of laughter was the moment of conception, that this thing she thought she had to cover up for was actually the thing that opened the way for the impossible. See, as readers of the story we make a mistake in thinking Sarah was right to lie about laughing, that she was right in her self-assessment that she shouldn't have laughed. But the story itself suggests something else, that her laughter was the beginning of the promise finally, at long last fulfilled.

Think about it: laughter, real laughter, the sort that overtakes you and makes you lose control of yourself for a minute, the sort that leaves you teary and exhausted but happily so, puts you in a place of receptivity and even blessed surrender.

Which is such a gift. Totally given. Never to be manipulated from the hands of the mysterious giver, always arriving nearly unbidden.

We live lives of such utter control. We even aim for such utter control. Everything managed, everything preordained, the end of an attempt decided upon before the attempt is even begun. Spontaneity has been planned out of existence. Children don't play, they play "youth sports." Adults don't play, they do the things they already know they can do and do pretty well. Even worship services in some churches that I read about seem as highly produced as your average Broadway show, with very little at stake, very little chance that something might happen by chance, or better to say by the always surprising movement of the Holy Spirit. And with forefathers like the philosophers I just rattled off, the modern era might prove to be the most stultifyingly dour, and perhaps even crushingly cruel, age for humans to endure.

But here's one more modern voice to add to the mix, Reinhold Niebuhr, the mid-century neoorthodox Christian and eventual clergyperson of the United Church of Christ. He said, "Humor is a prelude to faith and laughter is the beginning of prayer."

Now that's more like it!

The hymn we'll sing next is both familiar and also new. I wrote it because I just *couldn't* with most of what fills our hymnals. Not today. Not with Sarah being here of all

people. We have a deep and abounding tradition of hymnody, something I value even when none of them seem quite right.

I don't depart from it lightly.

And you might deem it a little corny.

You wouldn't be wrong.

But it's June, and summer is about to burst forth. And life in the wider world is hard, as we all know. Cruelty, corruption. Closer to home people struggling to pay their bills. Many households in crisis. All true.

We laugh together in joyful defiance of the dreary world. And by such laughter we conceive both of something entirely new, and also as long promised as the prophets are old. A new creation where mourning and crying and pain are no more, where the pall that is cast over all people is lifted, where the laughter of the Holy Spirit arrives and sustains. Be careful, you who stand so stiffly, so uprightly, or it might knock you right over and you will delight to be so light and spry in your standing.

Thanks be to God.