

Opening

Check-in & Introductions

Sarah Laughed

The Bible Story

Please watch the story, following the link provided. If you would like to read the story as well, the text has been provided below.

Watch the Story *(Biblical adaptations written by Rev. Brenda Stobbe)*

Together, watch the children's story time found on Manchester Children & Families Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/178276089786532/>

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 18:1-15 (NRSV)

¹The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He 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. ³He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let 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." ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures^[e] of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then 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. ⁹They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." ¹⁰Then 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. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Wondering Questions (Part I)

"Wondering Questions" are open ended discussion questions. These are the same questions that our children are working through!

Wondering Questions for Children *(written by Rev. Brenda Stobbe)*

1. I wonder what the Lord's voice sounded like?
2. I wonder what Sarah's laughter sounded like?
3. I wonder if Sarah laughed after her baby was born?

Wondering Questions for Older Children *(written by Rev. Brenda Stobbe)*

4. How do you think Sarah and Abraham felt about God's promise when they got to be really old and still didn't have a baby?
5. There are many kinds of laughter. In your experience you have heard laughter that makes you hurt, the kind that makes fun of someone. You have also heard laughter that makes you want to join in with the ones laughing. When Sarah heard the words about the baby, she laughed. Which kind of laughter was this?
6. Sarah and Abraham were so old it HAD to be God who had created the baby. Have you ever felt like there were times when you did something and you don't know how you did it? Have you considered that maybe God had a hand in it?

What's Going On

In the Good Shepherd children's curriculum, a section called "Teacher Helps" is provided. This section gives a deeper background to us adults Please take turns reading through this section.

Teacher Helps *(written by Rev. Brenda Stobbe)*

The thrust of this story is that we worship a God who keeps God's promises. Abram left his homeland to go where God told him. The promises God made to Abram were many. They included land, wealth and heirs. But in this story, we share the sadness, disillusionment and lack of hope that Abram experienced, even after his name was changed to Abraham when the covenant and promise of an heir had been restated in Genesis 15:4-6. Then, comes the rather confusing visit of the three strangers. We are not told that any of these three are God, but about halfway through their presentation we are suddenly hearing the voice of the Lord. I have tried to tell this story as faithfully as possible, simply naming the voice of the Lord, without explaining the conflict.

The lesson taught to Abraham, Sarah and all of the people of God is that nothing is impossible when God is in the picture. The extreme ages of Abraham and Sarah in this story make the barrenness of Sarah a certainty that cannot be changed. But in the womb of a 90 year old barren woman God placed the promise of a nation. Notice that it is not Abraham's son by Hagar who is allowed to be the heir. It must be Sarah's son. Abraham is not the only one of God's people to be a factor in the promise. Sarah is to be the mother of the promised heir, as God said. And Abraham can try all he wants to work his own destiny. Here it is Yahweh who will decide which child will carry the promise of a great nation with him. And the child will be the son of Sarah.

The laughter of Abraham and Sarah when the birth of the child is promised in this story is not joyful laughter, but rather skeptical and derisive laughter. This laughter is the laughter of the ridiculous and probably produces tears of pain and frustration rather than joy. But the laughter of Sarah after the birth of the child, when the heir is named Isaac, or laughter, is what we call the Easter laugh. It is the laughter that finally accepts the impossible as reality and opens new possibilities for life. It is pure joy and tends to cause those around to smile, even if they don't know what caused the laughter.

Note that we do not have a story in the Good Shepherd room regarding God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. That story is not appropriate for the broadly graded classroom we call for in this program. If there are children in the room that ask about the story, tell them that you will talk with them about that after the story presentation is finished and you are free

to be with them one on one. Be sure to emphasize as you read the story together that God provided a way for Isaac to be spared. We don't know why God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, we just know God arranged for Isaac to be spared.

The wondering questions begin with a wonderment about how God's voice sounded. This is a verbalization of a very common wonderment of children. They wonder what God looks like, how God sounds and all the other concrete characteristics they know about other people. The most difficult thing to teach young children is the concept of God as a spirit. Spirit is a conceptual word and children do not think conceptually until they are about 12 years old. So, we allow them to wonder how God's voice sounds. All answers are as valid as the others since none of us really knows the answer.

After wondering about God's voice, we wonder about Sarah's laughter. It will be interesting to see if any of the children, now or later, pick up on the kind of laughter Sarah hid behind the tent flap.

The final wondering question allows for the difference in laughter that Sarah may have experienced as she proclaims, "God has made laughter for me." Children may be able to share their laughter and joy at the birth of a sibling or close friend's child. The covenant made with Abraham is the earliest covenant in the Bible. This is really the beginning of the history of the people of God. The promise to Abraham included land, wealth and an heir. By the end of this story Abraham has all three. Newness and hope has come from barrenness. And with God nothing is impossible.

Wondering Questions (Part II)

Wondering Questions for Adults

1. How might a child hear this story? What might this story mean to a child?
2. When/where in your life have you fallen into sadness, fear, or loss while waiting for something better? How has comedy or ridicule helped you deal with those feelings?
3. How do you respond when things are too much to handle?
4. Who are the strangers speaking with the voice of God within our own context?
5. What does it mean to turn our feelings of powerlessness over to God? What does this surrender require of us? How do we reclaim power through our faith?

Closing

Prayer

God of laughter, we thank you for being a keeper of promises. When we try to make our own way, outside of your plans, remind us that our plans are laughable, compared to yours. Connect our community to each other and to your promises. Help us to hear our voice through strangers, neighbors, and each other so that we may witness to you in the world. **Amen.**

Study Link

<https://manchesterumc.org/all-church-study/>

"Ridicule, I suppose, is an attitude of defiance: we must laugh in the face of our helplessness or go insane." – Charlie Chaplin