

“Sarah Laughed,” Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 4/19/26

Genesis 18:9-15; Luke 24:13-35

*Sarah denied [it], saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “Yes, you did laugh.”*

Sarah denied that she had laughed, because she was afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid of laughing at God. Afraid of suggesting that God could not do what had been promised.

People do not often laugh in the Bible, and by that, I mean laughing out of happiness or joy. Laughter is in there, but it is often a matter of scorn. It is a question of derision, laughing *at* something rather than laughing *with* someone.

Sarah here is laughing at the notion that she could become pregnant. We heard that “Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” In less Biblically obscure words, Sarah had gone through menopause. And she was probably around 90 years old.

We might imagine someone of that age getting pregnant as a bit far-fetched. Sarah clearly did. And so, she laughed, because it was a ridiculous idea. She laughed and then denied doing so because you do not laugh at God. Because, again, laughing in the Bible is not about joy. It is about contempt.

The Bible is not a normal book. It serves a purpose and that is not entertainment. I am sure it might be entertaining for some people, and whatever floats your boat, who am I to judge. Well, actually, in this moment I am exactly the person judging because this is my sermon. And in my sermon, the Bible is not about joy or laughter, but moral guidance, religious introspection, and cautionary tales.

Because of this preoccupation, the Bible’s outlook is not always filled with joy or laughter. In the religious corner of our lives, we are supposed to be serious. We are supposed to be fearful of the Lord, which can suggest a sense of wonder and awe, but it can also be simple fear. Fear about suffering. Fear about hell and damnation. Fear, so you need to repent for the end is nigh and all that.

But is that necessary all the time? Is it necessary for us to be serious, afraid for the future, and worried about the what comes next? Is that truly necessary?

For Sarah, it seems so. She was a woman in the Bible, so that was not a good start, not an optimal pathway to happiness. Because women in the Bible are often caught up in the troubles caused by men – you might have opinions about that question in modern life. Most of the women in the Bible do not have any power. Next Sunday we will hear about the power Sarah has, in that case over her handmaiden Hagar, and that is not a pleasant form of power. But for the most part, women like Sarah have things happen to them rather than making things happen on their own.

We also do not always lift up the joyful parts of the Bible, such as the psalms, many of which are meant to be belted out with gladness. The relief of people healed, the relief of people saved. And depending upon the Biblical tradition in which you grew up, that omission of joy is intentional. Because you are not supposed to be happy, or at least you are not supposed to *talk* about being happy.

Perhaps that is to avoid breaking the spell, disrupting the stretch of good luck you might be in. If you are at all familiar with the Roman Stoics, this is their philosophical tendency. Joy is fleeting and suffering is to be endured. Not a big party crowd, the Stoics. And many Christian traditions embraced their reticence. They emulate their reserved character.

Compare that with the Greek Epicureans. Those who proclaim instead that life is ultimately about happiness, meaning the absence of pain or mental distress. You should not live in fear, fear of God or fear of suffering. What one needs is easy to get and what one must suffer is easy to endure. Their words, not mine. I do not make any claim of supporting these ideas, but I will note that a few of these ideas made their way into the Bible. Sometimes it was in agreement. And sometimes it was as criticism of the ideas.

In Isaiah we hear, “let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die.” A bit of advice before the eve of battle. In Ecclesiastes we hear, “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor.” That one is a bit more positive, pro-joy shall we say, but also sad in a way. When the author says there is nothing better, he means there is nothing better after a lifetime of searching. Nothing more important or noble to do than to eat and drink and be merry.

In the Gospels, we hear a more critical view. In the parable of the foolish rich man in Luke, when the man speaks to himself about what to do: “And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

And that is the telling piece, the shift we need to understand. Just as wealth does little good for the rich man who should be caring for those around him, not storing up wealth without end or purpose, so too, we must not be wealthy in the practical sense but become rich toward God. Rich in and toward God. What might that look like?

On Friday night, Diego and I went to a gathering. It was a shabbat service at Temple Beth Zion. The senior rabbi there is Claudia Kreiman, an old friend and colleague. If you attend Diego’s ordination on May 17, you will get to hear Rabbi Claudia offer a prayer from the community.

This shabbat service is a special one. This one happens once every month and involves a lot of singing. The texts are in Hebrew and are mostly derived from the Book of Psalms.

And they are gorgeous. The music is simple, with a guitar and violin and some drums. But the true beauty comes from the people. The people and their singing. There were a few hundred gathered that night. Sometimes sitting, sometimes rising up when the music moved them.

You would imagine that they would not be so moved – it's just the Bible. It is just passages from the Bible. You know, the boring part on Sunday when you hear for the hundredth time what one shall do and shall not do. And yet, these people were up on their feet clapping, making a joyful noise unto the Lord. They were singing out the psalms, perhaps as they were intended to be sung. In groups of people up on their feet, accompanied by strings and drums. With many voices strong and calling out.

Behind me there were a dozen children babbling and laughing and crying. It is not intended to be a meditative experience. We were sitting in a large circle of chairs oriented into the center of the room. At the front, is the Bema, the raised dais on which the Torah ark sits. We were focused toward the singers in the center, but I noticed a little girl who had climbed up onto the Bema was walking around. Just playing and talking and watching all the people.

Do you think she was rich with God? Standing up high on that holy place? Or do you think it was not good, that someone like me should have said something about this wandering child? Make her stop, make her behave in some other way? Eventually, her father joined her up there. But he did not drag her away. He simply joined her and watched.

Do you think they were rich with God?

Towards the end of the many songs – and yes, there were two hours of nearly non-stop singing – there was one piece when people got up and began to dance. They were dancing the *hora*, a circle dance you might have seen at Jewish weddings and celebrations. It is a dance to express a sense of joy and community. At first there were two people circling round the room. And then ten and then there were twenty. And then the room was a circle of people. People dancing and singing with joy and laughter.

And at one point, at the front of the line of dancing people was a certain person, our very own intern Diego. Diego out there leading them along. Rabbi Claudia called out to the people to let them know that a Unitarian minister in training was guiding them along. In case any of you were wondering why we decided to ordain him, by the way.

And I sat there in the audience and laughed. I laughed not because there was anything wrong. Not because there was anything to be ashamed of. Not because I was standing in judgement of their joy or their laughter or of the little girl standing next to the ark.

I laughed because it was a wonderful moment. It was a moment of joy felt among those friends and those strangers. It was a moment of joy felt within a community forged in one evening. Communities like this are formed all the time. They gather and then part, no community ever being exactly the same from time to time, from night to night.

The same is true here. We are not exactly the same from Sunday to Sunday, or from year to year. A hundred years ago this community was probably quite different, with different people with different ideas and concerns. And over the course of time, our ideas change, just like the faces we might see.

After the singing and dancing on Friday night, there was then a traditional shabbat service with prayers from their prayer book, the Shema and the mourner's Kadish. Prayers that I do not know but which I remember my father knew by heart. In case you were wondering, the Shema prayer is as follows in English: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart."

This Friday night began in joy and ended in ancient tradition. All the while standing in the flow of time, the great river of tradition. From the days of Sarah and Abraham. From the time of Jesus and the disciples. From the ancient past of the Roman Church, the English Protestants, and the American Unitarians here and now. The same river, if not always the same people, the same practices, or the same outlook.

Are we a people rich in God? And what might that mean? Do we give deeply of ourselves to God and to others? Do we pray often, do we meditate daily? Do we think about the meaning of life? Do we consider what we might do to make a better world, or a better city, or simply a better church?

There is more to being rich with God than turning through the pages of the Bible. There is this life. This precious life we have. And yes, it is good to eat, drink, and be merry. At least I will tell you that. That is good. But it is better to eat, drink, and be merry *with* others. Better to make sure others can eat, drink, and be merry. Better to make places for people to sing and to dance, to break bread together and to have a few laughs around the table.

A colleague of mine the other day was leading worship at a retreat and she reminded us of an old piece of advice: if you cannot sing well, make up for it by singing *loudly*. Now, your neighbor might have different advice for you, or your spouse, but I will tell you to sing out proudly. Because you can. If you enjoy singing, if you enjoy dancing, if you want to eat, drink, and be merry, please do so. And please make sure that you share that chance. Please make sure that others can join in the opportunity. For like the foolish rich man, we should not simply be storing up riches, hoarding wealth, and withholding the blessings we have received.

Sarah tried to tell God that she did not laugh. Because she was ashamed that she had doubted God's promise. I find that sad, but it is normal to hear such things in the Bible. However, besides in the readings, I hope that you never hear such things in this church. That neither myself nor Diego, or anyone next to you in the pews, would ever tell you to hide your light under a bushel basket. Not to sing out loudly and proudly. Not to share your true self here of all places. And not

to make anyone else feel they are less than welcome to share in that freedom and joy in this place.

A religious community should be a place of welcome, a place of laughter and joy, a place of truth and a place of lovingkindness. A place you enter with a feeling of gladness and a place you leave with a sense of renewed purpose and strength for the journey. My dear friends, I bid to you a fine day and ask for the blessings of God to be upon you. Amen.