



“Ha!”

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

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I remember it like it was yesterday. It was the snort to end all snorts. It was the fall of 1985. Winston-Salem, NC. Wake Forest University campus. Third floor, North wing of New New Dorm. (This is before Mr. Collins ponied up the money for dorm naming rights yet, so yes, it was called “new new dorm.”) I was with Kathy, Beth and Jen. We were sitting on the floor of Jen’s room, sharing stories from the weekend. Jen had just been to the grocery store and was snacking on Gummy Bears. She had just popped a red one into her mouth when Kathy told the funniest late-night college adventure story we had ever heard. *SNORT* Jen snort-laughed and then looked at us wide eyed. Her eyes began to brim with water and then she sneezed. And it was at that moment--against all laws of nature and human anatomy--that the red Gummy Bear came shooting right out of Jen’s left nostril and bounced off of Beth’s arm. It was so funny, I’ve even forgotten Kathy’s ridiculous story that caused the snort.

This morning, let’s talk about laughter. There are so many different types of laughter. Let’s name 6 today.

First, there’s a giggle. A giggle shows you’re delighted with something. At the sight of bubbles, my four-year-old niece giggles uncontrollably.

Secondly, there is inappropriate laughter, for those times you feel “super awkward.” Like when you think someone is kidding—and you laugh—and then you realize they weren’t kidding.

Third is the snort. We’ve already covered the snort.

Fourth is fall on your face laughter. There’s even text shorthand for it—if LOL is laugh out loud, ROTFLOL is rolling on the floor laughing out loud. This happens when you’re sleep deprived at Montreat and any silly comment drops you to the floor, tears streaming down your face, helplessly overtaken by laughter. It can also happen when someone says something so over the top that you end up on the ground. In Chapter 17 of Genesis, God tells 100-year-old Abraham he and his wife Sarah will have a son. In verse 17, Abraham falls on his face and laughs at the wonder . . . the audaciousness of that promise.

So far we have the giggle, the inappropriate laughter, the snort, and the fall on your face laughter. Next there's joyful laughter. That's the bubbling over happy laughter when your loved one arrives home safely from overseas military duty. That's the laughter we hear from the father of the prodigal son, as he runs to meet his younger boy who has reappeared after being gone for what may have been forever. Joyful laughter is especially powerful: it's what Yale Divinity School's Dr. Willie Jennings calls "[A]n act of resistance against death. Death in all its signatures, death, violence, war, debt, all the ways in which life can be strangled." Joyful laughter can be life-saving.

And that leaves us with our final type of laughter: the scoff. As in "Ha!" Like falling on the floor, this too is a response to something that sounds ridiculous, but it also contains a layer of self-protection. Like Wonder Woman's bullet proof cuffs, we imagine that a good hearty "Ha!" can protect us from just about any kind of painful feeling. It's a laughter devoid of joy. It says, "I'm not willing to believe you, because if I do I might really get hurt."

Every time I've heard this Genesis story of Sarah laughing when she heard of the promise of a son, I've understood it to be joyful laughter. Laughter as an act of resistance against death. Joyful laughter because it was the very best news for a woman in that time so long ago when most of her value was based on the number of sons she produced.

And yet not every Bible scholar agrees with this assumption of Sarah's joyful laughter. Dr. Esther M. Shkop, Dean of Hebrew Theological College, notes that just like in English, there are multiple Hebrew words for laughter. One in particular--*tsahak* "is used where laughter is devoid of joy" and may serve to mask mockery. *Tsahak* is in Exodus when the Israelites made fools of themselves around the Golden Calf. *Tsahak* tells the story of Samson, who turns the tables on his mockers and brings the temple down on himself and the Philistines. *Tsahak* describes the "vanquished Kingdom of Israel" in Ezekiel, when Israel is predicted to be an object of laughter and mockery.ⁱ

Dr. Shkop concludes that Sarah "expresses consternation at being an object of mockery" because the "tsahak" always implies laughter with a twist, protective laughter that hides what one is trying to repress.ⁱⁱ Why does Sarah scoff at this promise of pregnancy?

There are practical reasons. Sarah has to worry about nursing this child at age 90. She probably has also done the math and 90 plus (count on fingers) . . . that makes her 112 years old when Isaac graduates from college! (Or 113 if that child is on the five-year plan!)

Sarah must be wondering what others will say about her carrying a child at 90. She's thinking, "Will I live to teach Isaac the important life lessons a mother wants to pass down to her son? Will Isaac have his legitimacy questioned since his father Abraham is 100? How will my child

compete with his older step-brother Ishmael, his senior by 14 years, as they carry on the family name?”

Let’s take a step back and think about this part of Genesis. This story is not just a story about laughter or family or promise or hospitality. Yes, of course it’s about all those things. But primarily this story is about what the entire Bible is about: faith. Or rather, God’s unwavering, immeasurable love and our utter inability to believe we are worthy of it. Think about that: God’s unwavering, immeasurable love and our utter inability to believe we are worthy of it. We lack faith, despite all that we are promised. [hands] What God says equals what God does, but that is very difficult for us to understand or believe. Oh ye . . . oh us of little faith.

In his commentary on *Genesis*, theologian Walter Brueggemann says, “Abraham, and especially Sarah, are not offered here as models of faith but as models of disbelief.” [That means these Biblical heroes are human, like us!] Brueggemann continues, “For [Abraham and Sarah], the powerful promise of God outdistances their ability to receive it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sarah’s cynical laughter still echoes through our lives today. Want an example?

You can start on Feb 20th, 2016, in Mesa, Arizona, the day pitchers and catchers reported to the Chicago Cubs Spring Training facility. “This COULD be the year!” some crazy, eternally optimistic and naive people said. Most reasonable Cubs fans knew better. They knew about the curse of the billy goat, when Billy Sianis and his goat were asked to leave the game against the Detroit Tigers because the smell wafting from the goat was bothering some other fans. Since that day in 1945, the team has been cursed. And it was a strong curse, the type where over and over again Cubs fans would get their hopes up, only to have their hearts broken. “This could be the year the Cubs win the 2016 World Series? Ha!”

Comedian George Carlin says, “Inside every cynical person there is a disappointed idealist.” Cynical laughter comes from pain, from a desire to protect ourselves from hoping too much, feeling too deeply--from investing in faith. Author Andrew Byers take the definition a step further: “To be cynical is to be spiritually ill.”^{iv}

Sarah’s *tsahak* rings even closer to home. This may come as a shock to some of you who have laughed through years of his children’s sermons, but Senior Pastor Dave Fry thinks deeply about things. And sometimes he even gets concerned. Last year Dave met with members of the Business Committee here at church to discuss some of his anticipated concerns about the upcoming budget. After he finished sharing his uneasiness, Rob Keith replied with an audacious suggestion, a nutty, burning bush, voice out of nowhere, unhinged, make no sense type of suggestion: “You’re concerned about money?” Rob asked. “Why not hold a capital campaign and raise the \$800,000 we need to cancel the church’s debt?”

Dave's response? Like Sarah, he kept it to himself. But it was a resounding, "Ha!" After 30 years of stewardship and capital campaigns and now entering his final year of ministry here, Dave was just sure Rob's suggestion was idealistic and naïve and well, crazy. He didn't want to get hurt by investing hope in the fantastic possibility of leaving this church debt free. And so Dave said "Ha!"

But you know Dave Fry—the man does have faith in what God is doing through this church. So he met with a fundraising expert and soon learned that it was okay to dream. And as you heard this morning, we now have over a million dollars pledged, which will eliminate Pleasant Hill's debt and give us extra funds for even more "idealistic, naïve and crazy" ministry dreams. Rob, thank you for your faith. Dave, feel free to just sit there and grin like the Cheshire Cat. Or like a victorious Cubs fan after the last out of the 2016 World Series.

When else could we hear *tsahak*? You may be tempted to say, "Ha! Dave Fry founded this church and is retiring. We will never find another Head Pastor who can inspire us to Connect Faith with Everyday Life."

Have faith! There are amazing new leaders in Christ's church. Right now, at this very moment, God is working in the heart of someone preaching in another church, perhaps close by and maybe across the country. God is laying down those first stepping stones of a path that will lead him or her to Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church in Duluth.

How can we all get rid of the *tsahak*, the "Ha!" cynical laughter in our lives? Today is the end of National Refugee Week. In following Christ, our church embraces refugees, people who have fled peril in their own countries and are seeking safe harbor. We have resettled 33 Burmese refugees right here in Duluth.

Many Christians may be tempted to just throw up their hands and not bother to contact those making national policy about refugees. When they hear, "Contact your representative in the government and you will do some good on behalf of these voiceless refugees" many Christians will answer, "Ha! We dare not dream that things can get better. We know our work to welcome the stranger will be stomped on by government policy so we'll just cross our arms and say, 'Ha! Activism doesn't do any good anyway.'"

Have faith! Our church's refugee point person, Dave Huffman, shared this email Thursday: "I found out that we had a very exciting milestone and I couldn't wait to share it with you! Ms. Helen Thluai, who was in our second family and who arrived here with us in 2011, took the oath of citizenship yesterday. And how appropriate to do it on Flag Day! Here is Helen just after the ceremony. She is the first of 'our' Burmese refugees to pass the citizenship process, and her parents and Ngun Lan's family are proceeding through it now. Pray for them! Helen works in

the produce department at the Duluth Publix, so if you see her there, please say hello and congratulate her on this remarkable achievement.”

How do we get rid of the *tsahak*? Let’s turn again to our very human friend Sarah in Genesis 21. Sarah, who scoffed and then gave birth at the age of 90 to a boy named Isaac, whose name means *he will laugh*. There’s your evidence folks: if God says it, God does it. No less. And if you believe any less, if your faith is waning and you scoff and say “Ha!”—God will still fulfill God’s promises.

So lean in! Believe! Risk living fully! Stop trying to protect your feelings from getting hurt. (It’s impossible anyway.) Have faith that good things will happen. Like verse 14 says, “Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

So God gets the last laugh. And God’s laughter is JOYFUL laughter, life-saving laughter given to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let’s dare to get our hopes up, have faith, and laugh that joyful laughter right along with God. Amen.

ⁱ See Ezekiel 23:32, Judges 16:25. For the full article on ATLAS search Esther M. Shkop, Dean of the Anne M. Blitstein Teachers Institute of the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, IL.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.45.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, p. 160.

^{iv} Andrew Byers. “Faith Without Illusions.” *Christianity Today*.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/spiritualformation/faithwithoutillusions.html>