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Sarah laughed (Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7)

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Firstly, who is the Sarah of the Genesis story?

Miriam Therese Winter writes:

Sarah was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, where she married her brother Abraham. Their father was Terah, but they had different mothers whose names we do not know. Before God established a covenant with them, their names were Sarai and Abram. They left Ur to settle in the land of Canaan and lived for a while in Egypt and the Negeb before pitching their tent near the oaks of Mamrah in Kiriath-arba, which is Hebron.¹

She is now almost ninety.

This Sarah laughed.

She laughed, just as Abraham had laughed earlier at the impossibility of her ever conceiving a child. She was old, very old, and she had waited 25 years for the fulfilment of a promise from God, a promise initially made to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations and a blessing to the world.

Sarah laughed privately quietly in her tent. She laughed when she heard the message reaffirmed, the promise more specific this time, that within a year, she would have a son. Of course, Sarah laughed. This is the essence of the story, this, and the question, which follows, 'Is anything too wonderful for God? Is anything too difficult for God?' Sarah thinks maybe the answer is yes. What do you think? Is anything too difficult too wonderful for God? In the abstract, we might say "no definitely not", but as we live out our lives, as we are disappointed and let down and have to wait beyond what we think is a reasonable waiting time, we will be tempted to laugh, so yes, some things do seem to be impossible.

The question goes to the issue of how we see God in the world. What sort of God is it that we struggle to believe? Is it the God of the car park- find me a park please? Is it the God of creation, the beauty of the sunset? Or is it the One who stands alongside impotently when something terrible has happened?

What is the nature of God? This epic tale from the Hebrew, Muslim and Christian Scriptures, about 1,350 years old, tells an intriguing story, woven together from patriarchal and matriarchal sources intertwined.

Abraham, who was at the time called Abram was promised great things, and invited to leave home and follow God into the unknown. At the beginning, Sarah, then called Sarai, is a follower travelling with her husband. It's only later that we really know that the promise includes her. She is to be the mother of nations. And so they wander. Abraham mostly stumbles, and when they have to go to Egypt because of famine, he palms his wife off as his sister, and she is his half sister, because she

¹ Miriam, Therese Winter, *woman wisdom, a feminist lectionary and psalter, women of the Hebrew Scriptures: part one*, Collins Dove, VIC 1991

was beautiful and pharaoh desired her. Abraham is less likely to be killed if he's a brother than a husband! But, it seems God is with Sarah and sends harm to pharaoh while Sarah is there. So Pharaoh returns her to her husband and kicks them out of Egypt. Sound familiar? Remind you of Moses and the plagues?

Today we come to this scene 25 years on from when they left on this journey, and Sarah and Abraham are both very old. Abraham and the men of his camp have just been circumcised as part of the covenant with God.

And Abraham is sitting under a tree in the middle of the day in that sacred place, Mamre, when some travellers arrive. He bids them stay and offers them extravagant hospitality. At the end of that time there is a conversation which is meant for Sarah's ears. It is a reiteration of the promise with a more specific time frame. Within a year, she will have a son. Sarah laughed.

Abraham had laughed also a chapter or so earlier, but here she laughs and the messengers hear, and articulate that foundation question "Is anything too wonderful, too difficult for God?"

How would we answer that in the face of the Ukraine? In the face of climate change and economic hardship? Who is the God we worship?

God of the ordinary every day. Is God faithful? Are we?

Now, we skip a few chapters where amongst other adventures we read of Abraham advocating on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, and again passing Sarah off as his sister. It is a bumpy ride, but he is perhaps beginning to live as a blessing, beginning to understand.

Just a year later, and Sarah has her child named Isaac, which means 'God laughs'. She has had the last laugh or perhaps God has. Now she laughs with joy and her son is a continual reminder of that joy, and of the answer to that question, "Is anything too wonderful, too difficult for God?" "No", she would have to say, "no there isn't!"

This long foundation narrative speaks of two ordinary flawed people growing in wisdom and understanding. It speaks of a God who is with them through all the seasons of life, bringing newness out of hopelessness but as we know, this is not the end of the story. We will see more next week.

How do we laugh? With incredulity? With derision? With doubt? With hope and joyfulness? Sarah and Abraham laughed. God did too.

So what are we to make of this story after the reserved laughter and joyful laughter, all very human. I suspect it's an invitation in our humanness to trust, trust in the 'something more' that John was talking about last week, to stay the course, to keep on our journey, even when we feel like there's no answer, no God, only emptiness. To hang in there, trusting that hope can emerge from a hopeless life, can emerge from death, and believe God is still with us and journeys with us and desires life, and hope, when there seems to be none. This seems like another Holy Saturday story which ends with Easter, though of course it has many layers. One is its challenges to patriarchal views, and bringing a woman to the centre of the story.

In her book, *Angel and me*, Sarah Maitland² writes of Sarah as an old woman who reflects back on her life, an imaginative recreation of the birth story.

When Sarah is in labour giving birth to Isaac, she is too tired, and gives up. Hagar goes to find Abraham after two days of labour and tells him what is going on. He gets up and goes to the birthing tent and goads Sarah so she gets angry ..

'Get out,' she screamed, tucking her chin down, deepening out her voice, 'get out.'

² *Angel and me*, Sara Maitland, Mowbray, London, 1995, p14ff

He stood there mocking; a long wrought chain swinging in his hand. 'You can't make me,' he said.

She got to her feet; she rushed at him, her arm swinging for a slap. The pain of her son shifting inside her was convulsive. She screamed once and fell towards him. He caught her under her armpits, strong and solid. He held her, while her body heaved, usefully now. He held her, unmoving, solid, tough, he held her; he held her tight and did not let her go. Her contractions wrenched her, she was screaming, and he held her. Her contractions shook her with pain, and she was biting the side of his neck, fierce as an animal, and he was bleeding, and he held her.

Hagar knelt at their feet to deliver the child.

There was a pause; Sarah was panting, panting, deep, deep breaths in his arms. She threw back her head, seeking for air and looked right in his face.

'Soft,' he said softly, 'you're a soft woman, Sarah.'

She knew she had been tricked, she was furious and she laughed. They both laughed. They laughed, together, deep full laughter, and on the wave of her anger and laughter Isaac was born.

They called him Isaac. It meant 'God laughed'.

God laughed; God, their God who was God-without-a-name, their tricky complex God, El Shaddai, the Almighty laughed with them. Their God who likes there to be, not despair and corruption, but life and laughter in the tents, in all the holy places, laughed with them.

Hagar lifted up the child and handed him to Abraham, who should not have been there at all and she wrapped her arms around Sarah, and laid her down on her bed, and washed her, untiring, loving, washed her with a soft cloth. After the labour, washed tenderly and happily, with hands like cool honey.

Sarah is old, old and very tired. Her mind wanders, sometimes she laughs and sometimes she weeps, and she does not know which or why. Her mind wanders across all her long life, and she struggles to make it into a story: the story of her life, the story of Sarah.

This ancient story still has much to say about trust and hope and promise and human failure. It can call us to reexamine what we think God is about in our world, to stop and think about our laughter in light of what we learn of God in this story. It invites us to reevaluate how God is present in the world and in our lives as we trust. It is a call to a vision of new possibilities and renewal, not by our effort and determination, but solely by the grace of the God who laughs and brings newness into the endings of our lives.³

³ Dennis Bratcher © 2019 CRI/Voice: <http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearA/Aproper6ot.html>