Sarah and the Joy of God
Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Over the summer we're looking at the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish people - and today we're going to look at Sarah.

Before we do, let me ask you, what makes you laugh? If you were paying attention to the reading this morning, it's a pretty obvious question isn't it, because laughter and who's laughing, or not laughing and why, keep coming up.

So what does it for you? What brings a smile to your face? It could be almost anything, couldn't it. A friend's joke, or something silly your kid does. Your favourite comedian on stage or a video someone sends you on YouTube.

Now, I did know someone once who never seemed to laugh, instead she seemed to exist in a world of perpetual misery. And all our attempts to help her failed, until the penny finally dropped: she's happy being unhappy. And the drama and attention and anxiety she got from one crisis after another was her sweet-spot.

I can almost guarantee that's not you. Because the vast majority of us would rather smile than scowl and laugh than cry. We want to be and feel happy. But what Sarah teaches us is that sometimes we can laugh and smile, *not* because we're happy but because we're not. And the very thing making us smile may be the very thing robbing us of joy.

You see, Sarah's an old woman of 90. And when you meet someone of that age who is genuinely happy and hopeful and full of joy, and you hear them laugh and see their crease-lines, it's a beautiful thing. Sadly, that wasn't Sarah. At least, not to start with.

So, as we look at her, think about the trajectory of your life. What will your heart and character -look like when you're her age, and what does what you laugh at now tell you about how things will be then? And as we do, I want you to consider three things: How does joy die? How can joy be rekindled? And how that can be true for you?

How Joy Dies
Look at v1: 'And the LORD appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day.' But the question is, do Abraham and Sarah know this is God?

Well, it's hot, and Abraham's taking his siesta in the shade, and he looks up and verse 2 tells us, 'behold, three men were standing in front of him.' And despite the heat, Abraham runs to meet them, bows before them and treats them with deference. He calls one of them, v3, 'Lord', and calls himself 'your servant.' He washes their dirty feet and provides them with what he humbly describes in v5, as 'a morsel of bread' but in reality is a feast not a morsel. And having served them, v8, 'he stood by them under the tree while they ate', looking like a waiter.

Now imagine this was you, and you've been working all day and it's hot, and you've finally got into the shade, and you're just closing your eyes for a sleep when three total strangers pitch up. Would you start rushing around treating them like royalty, or like a right royal pain in the neck? And so the way Abraham treats them says to us, he must have known this was God. Why else behave like that?

Except, as multiple commentators point out, Abraham's simply showing bedouin hospitality. He's doing what anyone in his culture would do. He sees men in need of shade and refreshment and he gives it. And look at Hebrews 13:2: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, *for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*.' But who's the writer referring to? Well, probably Abraham, because in the first century Jewish world, Abraham and this event was held up as the example of hospitality. He has no idea who they are but treats them as those sent from heaven.

But if Abraham didn't know who they were, they clearly knew who he and his wife were: v9, 'They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?"' Notice Abraham's response, "She is in the tent." Except, apparently, the Hebrew is much shorter and terser than that. 'Where's Sarah your wife?' 'In the tent.'

And notice how he treats her when the guests arrive. Verse 6, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Kneed it, and make cakes."

So, he treats his guests like royalty, but how does he treat his wife? Like a servant. So, yes, he is a wonderful example of hospitality, but he's also an example of a man who behaves one way in public and another in private; who treats strangers better than his wife.

Why?

Well, yesterday we were at the wedding of Lukas' sister. And it was a great day because there's nothing like a wedding to put a smile on everyone's face. And 70 or more years before, Abraham and Sarah would have had just such a day. A day of feasting and gift giving, of joy and hope and the expectation of all that lay ahead of them as they came together in marriage, and of the family that would come to them.

And yet, here they are, 70 or more years later, and the hurts and scars in their marriage are all too obvious and their children are… non-existent. They have servants and possessions, but they have no family in a culture where family was everything. Imagine the toll that would have taken on their relationship.

Theodore Roosevelt described comparing yourself to others as 'the thief of all joy.' And it would have been hard, if not impossible, for Sarah *not* to compare herself to other women - maybe her sisters or neighbours, and now, as we saw last week, her servant girl Hagar. None of them had any problems having kids. And if she was making those comparisons, or if Abraham was, it's no wonder joy was in short supply.

Because by now, Abraham's 100 and Sarah's 90, and they have decades of hurt and disappointment and the emotional scars of that behind them.

And that's what explains Sarah's laugh. Verse 10, 'The LORD said [to Abraham], "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son."' And Sarah's inside listening. But before we're told her response we're told about her body, v11 'Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. *The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah*.' In other words, she's post-menopausal and has likely been like that for years. And here is a stranger saying she's going to have a son!

Verse 12, ‘So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”’ So is Sarah laughing because at last she’s going to have the pleasure of holding her own baby and experience the joy of motherhood? Is she laughing because finally the weight of cultural shame is going to be lifted from her?

And the answer is, no. Instead, she’s almost certainly laughing out of cynicism. She has experienced disappointments too many to number for her to believe this. “A son! Ha! Sure. If only.”

You see, when she says, “After I am worn out…” you could translate that as “After I have become shrivelled up…” And when she describes Abraham as being old the implication is that he’s not just old but impotent. Because when she says, “Shall I have pleasure?” It’s the word for sexual pleasure.

So, what’s her response? It’s ‘A son? O sure, when we’re not even having sex! When it’s been years since I’ve even felt his touch, let alone enjoyed it. Sure we’re going to have a son.’

And so Sarah’s not laughing out of joy, but because of the absence of joy. Because when hope dies, joy dies. And if Proverbs 13:12 says that ‘Hope deferred makes the heart sick’ one way it does that is by making us cynical. Or bitter. We stop believing things can be different. And your heart is so scarred by hurt it becomes hard.

Do you recognise that in yourself, or someone you know? Do you ever find a little wry smile playing across your face or laughing to yourself with just a hint of bitterness? If you’re a Christian, do you find yourself reading some promise or command of God in the Bible, or hear another Christian say something encouraging, and like Sarah you don’t say anything out loud, but inside your response is just like hers ‘sure, if only’.

But, of course, the death of hope is not the only reason we might respond like that. Maybe you find yourself smiling when some misfortune happens to someone you don’t like. Or you feel good about yourself and allow yourself a little smile because in comparison to others you’re a better person than they are, or you’re just doing better. Again, you wouldn’t say that out loud, because that would be crass, and what would others think of you? But you still think it. Or do you find yourself smiling when you get your own way. You’re not self-righteous like religious people, but it sure *feels* right when you come out on top.

And if you recognise any of those, ask yourself, what will your heart and character look like after a lifetime of smiling at what you smile at now?

You see, if comparing yourself to others, and the smile of cynicism because of the accumulated disappointments of life can rob you of joy, so too, ultimately, will the smile of self-righteousness and the smile of self-centredness. Because they’ll leave you judgemental of others - which leaves you with a deep-down anger and dislike of others, or kill your relationship with others. None of which are fertile soils for joy to grow in.

But there are still more reasons why joy can grow dim.

Like the way you’ve been treated by others. You see, it's not just that Abraham speaks to Sarah like a servant not a wife. It’s, has he spoken to her *at all* about God’s promise? Has he told her, reminded her, that they *would* have a child and God had given his word? In his commentary, Derek

Kinder points out that there's no evidence Abraham's ever told her, and even if he has, he hasn't convinced her.

You know, one of the striking things about the description of the excellent wife in Proverbs 31 is something I point out to the young couples who come to us for marriage prep: And that's that the husband talks to his wife. I know, it's revolutionary. Proverbs 31:28-29: 'Her children rise up *and call her blessed*; *her husband also*, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."'

Has Abraham done that? Has Abraham fought for Sarah's joy in the dark days? Has he spoken the word of God to her to keep her hope alive? Has he told her that whatever the circumstances say, she is blessed by God and God will keep his promises? Has he told her that she means more to him than any number of children? Maybe, but if he has the text is silent on the fact.

You see, sometimes our joy can falter because we don't have people around us encouraging us.

Now, all of that might sound pretty depressing, except, by chapter 21 Sarah is a transformed woman, and she really is laughing for joy. And the question is, what turns it around?

How Joy Can be Rekindled

And the Visitor doesn't just know Sarah's name, he knows her thoughts. Verse 13-14, '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 hard for the LORD?"'

So, for Sarah, the way back to joy began with knowing that God knows the state of her heart better than she does herself. And when you're hurting, or just confused and you don't even know *what* you're thinking, to know that God knows, and knows better than you, is an incredible comfort.

But then, if you look down at the footnote, you'll see that word *hard* can be translated *wonderful*. 'Abraham, Sarah is anything too *wonderful* for me to do?'

Now, if you've been to our place, you'll know that the view from our garden is pretty good: there are the old roof-tops of the village below us, then the fields and trees in the mid-ground and then the Jura in the background. And once we had friends arrive from the US, and they live in one of those areas that's just *flat*. And when I took them out to the garden, Jill saw the view and just stood there going, 'O, wow, O wow, O wow!'

What was going on? Her heart was being filled with wonder. And the Lord's saying to Abraham and Sarah, 'guys, I'm that kind of God. Nothing is too wonderful for me to do and as you trust me and see who I am and what I can do, your hearts will fill with wonder.'

Maybe you've never experienced that, or maybe you've forgotten what it's like, but when you begin to grasp that nothing is too hard or wonderful for God, joy begins to flicker and burn.

But what about timing? Verse 14, "*At the appointed time* I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son." Now, what are you like in traffic jams? Because I am not at my best. It feels like someone somewhere is conspiring against me, and I'm checking each lane to see

which one's moving faster, and if I change lanes and then the one I was in starts picking up speed I resent it.

And the words *joy* and *traffic jams*, do not go together, do they? Why? Because frustration and impatience also kill joy.

And here is God saying, there is an appointed time for this wonderful thing I am going to do. And when we begin to trust in his perfect timing, and refuse impatience, joy begins to flourish in the waiting.

But did you notice how Sarah responds to the Lord calling her out? Verse 15, 'But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.' And the Lord's response? 'He said, "No, but you did laugh."'

And, sometimes, if hope and joy are to be rekindled we need to allow the Lord to show us where we've become, or are becoming, jaundiced, cynical and tired. And yet, while the Lord corrects her, he doesn't crush her. He calls her our but he doesn't shame her. Instead, it's as if he holds up a mirror and says, 'no Sarah, you did laugh. Let's change that.'

And change it he does. Because come chapter 21 we're told, v1-2, 'The LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.' And what do they call their boy? Isaac. Which means? He laughs.

And now, in the face of the wonder of God's work in their lives, Sarah says, v6, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." Does she mean some will mock her - fancy a woman her age becoming pregnant!? Maybe, but if they do, Sarah doesn't mind. Let them laugh! Because God has made her laugh, and rekindled her joy, and proved himself faithful. He's done the wonderful thing - and the barren woman gives birth, and weakness has been turned to strength and cynicism to joy. "Is anything too wonderful for me?"

But, for all of that to happen, Sarah also had to do something, didn't she? She had to go back to bed with Abraham. She had to re-engage. If she had withdrawn to separate beds and separate rooms, she had to be willing to start over and make herself vulnerable again, and be open to God doing the wonderful.

What might that look like for us? Well, it may be as simple as you re-engaging with God through prayer and Bible reading. And being open to hearing about his character and promises and responding with faith, not cynicism. It might be reengaging with a community - like a small group - that can encourage you and speak God's words to you. It might be refusing to walk away from a situation at work or in your wider family that seems hopeless and like Sarah walking back in the door.

Whatever it is for you, it's what Sarah does. And that took faith and not, at least in the first place, in Abraham. As Hebrews says, 'By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, *since she considered him faithful who had promised*' (Heb 11:11). So at some point, just as Abraham had believed God under the stars, Sarah also believed, 'ok God, I believe you can do this, so I'm going back to my husband.'

And even before she does that, there's a clue in her response that even though she is struggling with cynicism and disbelief all is not lost. She says that she is dried up and past it and then she talks of Abraham, and look what she calls him: v12, "My Lord." And if Hebrews holds up Abraham as a model of hospitality, in 1 Peter 3:6. Peter holds up Sarah as a model of respect. Because just like almost every other wife she has ample reason to talk down her husband: after all, she knows what he's like in private, but she doesn't. She honours him.

And when we have been hurt by others there's always the temptation to slash and burn their reputation. If instead we choose to think the best of them, and not let bitterness take root, joy is around the corner.

But what if you're thinking, 'Great for Sarah, but I don't see him coming up with anything wonderful in my situation, and believe me, I've prayed for it.' Sure. But what if he already has?

How That Can be True for You

Now, if in v14 the Lord says, "Is anything too hard [and too wonderful] for the LORD?" What's harder or more wonderful than a barren woman giving birth?

How about a virgin?

And a thousand years later, God chooses Mary, descendent of Sarah. And Sarah was old, but Mary was just a teenager. And Sarah had been married for years, but Mary was unmarried. And Sarah was barren but Mary was a virgin. And as the Lord comes to Abraham and Sarah and tells them they will have a son, so an angel comes to Mary and says, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus" (Luke 1:31).

And Sarah questions, asking 'when I'm old and Abraham's old, is this really going to happen?' And Mary asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). And the Lord says to Sarah, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (18:14), but his reply comes to Mary, "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

And if Sarah bore Isaac, *He laughs*, the forebear of the Messiah, Mary bore Jesus, who's name means, *He - the Lord - Saves*. But why does he come? Well, here, Abraham washes the Lord's feet, and offers him a feast. But Christ came to wash our feet and invites us to a feast. And he came among us not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

And so, if the Lord visited Sarah and Abraham in their hopelessness, how much more true is that of Christ visiting us. And he does it to lift our burden of sin and shame. And he does it to rekindle our joy - joy in the pleasures that are at his right hand forevermore. Because what is more wonderful than the Son of God dying for us and then rising from the dead. Because that's the ultimate example of new birth out of barrenness, and hope out of hopelessness and life out of death.

And as Paul writes, if 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things' (Rom 8:32). We may, like Sarah, have to wait a lifetime to see it. Or maybe even longer. But if, while we wait, we think deeply about the wonder of the gospel, our hearts will be filled with wonder and worship; and joy and hope.

And we'll smile and laugh for all the right reasons.