

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC
 Joyful Hope Fills the Scene
 (or, “Do YOU Ever Share Your
 Joy With Others?”)
 Genesis 21:1-7
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 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
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Genesis 21:1-7; (NRSV)

- 1 *The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised.*
- 2 *Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.*
- 3 *Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.*
- 4 *And Abraham circumcised his Son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.*
- 5 *Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.*
- 6 *Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me, everyone who hears will laugh with me.”*
- 7 *And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age.”*

One of my heroes in the faith was a Lutheran Pastor named Edmund Steimle. For years Dr. Steimle was professor of Homiletics (or “preaching”) at Union Theological Seminary in New York and was the favored Lutheran Preacher on “The Protestant Hour” radio show. I was privileged on several occasions to be in continuing education classes led by Dr. Steimle.

One of the things that Dr. Steimle taught me was that it is unwise in a sermon ever to quote more than a sentence or two from another person’s book or writing.

Acknowledging that, I am going to do what Dr. Steimle taught me not to do: I am going to read you a long quotation from another of my heroes in the faith, Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner; it is from his book, Telling the Truth.

The place to start is with a woman laughing. She is an old woman, and, after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and rutted like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts to shake. She squinnies her eyes shut, and her laughter is all China teeth and wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing ninety-one hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby. Even though it was an angel who told her, she can’t control herself; and her husband can’t control himself either. He keeps a straight face a few seconds

longer than she does, but he ends by cracking up, too. Even the angel is not unaffected. He hides his mouth behind his golden scapular, but you can still see his eyes. They are larkspur blue and brimming with something of which the laughter of the old woman and her husband is at best only a rough translation.

The old woman's name is Sarah, of course, and the old man's name is Abraham, and they are laughing at the idea of a baby being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare's picking up the tab. They are laughing because the angel not only seems to believe it but seems to expect them to believe it too. They are laughing because with part of themselves they do believe it. They are laughing because with another part of themselves they know it would take a fool to believe it. They are laughing because laughing is better than crying and maybe not even all that different. They are laughing because if by some crazy chance it should just happen to come true, then they would really have something to laugh about. They are laughing at God and with God, and they are laughing at themselves too because laughter has that in common with weeping. No matter what the immediate occasion is of either your laughter or your tears, the object of both ends up being yourself and your own life.

(Buechner, Frederick, Telling the Truth – The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale, New York, Harper & Rowe, Publishers, 1977, pp. 49-50)

I told you several Sundays ago in worship that the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are **pre-historical stories**. I meant by “pre-historical” that they were stories told around campfires long before writing was ever invented. And while the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are certainly part of our faith history, our recorded faith history really begins with the stories of God calling Abraham and Sarah to be a blessing to the other peoples of the world. The “call” is given in Genesis 12:1-3 (NRSV):

*Now the Lord said to Abram,
“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house
to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you and make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse; and
in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

But alas, no child is born to Abraham and Sarah. Many, many years pass by. The promise that Abraham and Sarah will have a family which will bless the world remains, but no child is born.

The chapter from which today's passage is taken is chapter 21. It is the birth of Isaac chapter. Three chapters earlier, chapter 18, has an interesting, birth-prophecy story and I want to read it to you from the Today's English Version translation put out by the American Bible Society; it is sometimes referred to as “The Good News Bible.”

The Lord appeared to Abraham at the sacred trees of Mamre. As Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent during the hottest part of the day, he looked up and saw three men standing there. As soon as he saw them, he ran out to meet them. Bowing down with his face touching the ground, he said, "Sirs, please do not pass by my home without stopping; I am here to serve you. Let me bring some water for you to wash your feet; you can rest here beneath this tree. I will also bring a bit of food; it will give you strength to continue your journey. You have honored me by coming to my home, so let me serve you."

They replied, "Thank you; we accept."

Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, "Quick, take a sack of your best flour, and bake some bread." Then he ran to the herd and picked out a calf that was tender and fat, and gave it to a servant who hurried to get it ready. He took some cream, some milk, and the meat, and set the food before the men. There under the tree he served them himself, and they ate.

Then they asked him, "Where is your wife Sarah?"

"She is there in the tent," he answered.

One of them said, "Nine months from now I will come back, and your wife Sarah will have a son."

Sarah was behind him at the door of the tent, listening. Abraham and Sarah were very old, and Sarah had stopped having her monthly periods. So Sarah laughed to herself and said, "Now that I am old and worn out, can I still enjoy sex? And besides, my husband is old too."

Then the Lord asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Can I really have a child when I am so old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? As I have said, nine months from now I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

Because Sarah was afraid, she denied it. "I didn't laugh," she said.

"Yes, you did," he replied. "You laughed."

[Genesis 18:1-15, TEV]

In earlier stories from Genesis, the word **"aetiology"** had made an appearance. You will remember that the word **"aetiology"** means **"causal."**

An aetiological story was told in order to tell **the cause** or **the beginning** of something, such as the Genesis creation story which tried to tell why snakes have no legs. All of which is to ask:

WHERE IN THE WORLD DID THE NAME “ISSAC” ORIGINATE?

Perhaps you already know where I am going with this story.

Perhaps you already know from whence comes the name “Issac.”

Perhaps you already know that the Hebrew word for **LAUGHTER** is the word **ISAAC!**

Is that a surprise for you?

Did you know that Abraham and Sarah named their son “Laughter”?

There is one Charles Schulz PEANUTS CARTOON which shows Lucy Van Pelt having a serious discussion with her little brother Linus.

LUCY: I wonder if I wouldn't be more popular if I had a new name... The wrong name can be a real hindrance to a person's functioning in society. I think a name which is consistent with a person's personality is important. I wonder what would be a good name for me...

LINUS: How about “Supermouth”?

POW!!! [Lucy slugs him!]

LINUS: I've got to stop this business of talking without thinking...

All of which has got to make you and me wrestle with the question:

FOR WHAT DOES MY NAME STAND?

What do people think of when they hear my name?

What does God think of when God hears my name?

My dear friends in Christ: This morning I want to remind you that in the Presbyterian Church there are two Sacraments: the Sacrament of Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Baptism.

The Sacrament of Baptism is that which prepares us for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. **For it is in the Sacrament of Baptism that our names are changed.**

Before the Sacrament of Baptism, I was James Thomas Richardson.

After the Sacrament of Baptism, I was James Thomas Richardson, Christian.

As the Apostle Paul put it: “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, that one is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” (II Cor. 5:17)

WHAT DOES YOUR NAME MEAN TO YOU?

WHAT DOES YOUR NAME MEAN TO YOUR NEIGHBORS?

WHAT DOES YOUR NAME MEAN TO GOD?

Back to the story of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac.

In the prophecy story where three messengers from God eat out in front of Abraham’s tent and Sarah laughs when she hears the prophecy of her pregnancy in her old age, the Messenger of God asks the question: **“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”**

And nine months later, JOYFUL HOPE FILLS THE SCENE:

Isaac is born.

Is anything too hard for the Lord?

What does your name mean to you?

What does the name *Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church* mean to you?

Is anything too hard for the Lord?