

At God's Laughing Waters

A sermon preached by Sidney D. Fowler based on Genesis 17:19, 18:10-14a, 21:1-7 and Luke 15:1-9.
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Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria VA

I. Introduction: Children at God's Laughing Waters

Ever notice how quickly children laugh
when they have the opportunity to play in water?
There is the giggle of kids splashing around, landing on their rears, in the kiddie pool.
There are the chuckles of children stomping around in the puddles following a good rain.
And then there is that back and forth, back and forth, craziness of kids hauling buckets of water
from the ocean to their dug out hole in the sand – where they jump up and down – laughing.
It makes no sense even when kids hate taking a bath,
that when you put them in the tub with a boat, doll,
or gigantic amounts Mr. Bubble's bubble bath, they'll just giggle.

A few minutes ago, did you notice Susanna as she poured the water
into the baptismal bowl for her brother Isaac? How she made us smile?
I bet every one of the kids that gathered around the basin wished
they could have poured the water.
Children and water – although the combination can be scary at times, even dangerous,
for the most part – children and water adds up to laughter.

Several years ago, I baptized a three-year-old boy named Will.
He was blessed by a generous amount of water when he was baptized.
But following the baptism, Will took baptism into his own hands.
While all the adults were hugging, embracing,
Will continued to *play* in the water until we heard him
hooting out loud with laughter.
He was drenched — his hair plastered to his head, his clothes sopping wet,
grinning from ear to ear, all proud of himself.
The baptismal bowl had become God's laughing waters, laughing waters.

Today, at the very special invitation
of God and another little boy, this one named Isaac,
all of us are asked to come to God's laughing waters.

Thanks to Isaac,
we are able to re-imagine the waters of baptism as God's laughing waters.
You see, Isaac's name, is a good Hebrew name that means "he will laugh."
Right out of Genesis, that first book of the Bible, another baby named Isaac –
was a child of God's promise that brought laughter and unbelievable joy
to a world longing for hope.
Today, at the waters of baptism,
God presents us once again with a child of promise named "Laughter."

God blesses us this day with
Water and Child, Laughter and Promise,
with God's Laughing Waters.

II. God's Water Work, Laughing Waters, at Baptism

Here at Hope UCC,

when we talk about baptism and we pray over the waters,
we recall all the stories of how God has worked powerfully through water.

When Kala and Susanna poured the water into the basin –

We recalled when God gave us water at creation,
and God delivered Noah and his family on an ark and a rainbow appeared;
When God liberated the Hebrew children from slavery through the Red Sea,
and spoke to the prophets about bringing a flowing stream through the wilderness.

We recall when Jesus, full of the Spirit, was baptized at the river Jordan,
and became "Living Water" to the woman at the well.

We remember that when we are baptized we go down into the abyss of death
and rise with Christ out of the water.

III. God's Water Work in the Laughter of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac

In our blessing over the water,

we also recall when Jesus was nurtured in the
the womb of the young maiden Mary.

But long before God nurtured *Jesus* in the water of the womb,

we discover in the book of Genesis, how God did the impossible by
bringing water to the womb of an old dried-up barren woman named Sarah.

Perhaps you know the story of Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Perhaps you know something of the miracle that happened to him and his wife Sarah.

Through them and their children's' children,

God promised to bring forth a holy and just people, a chosen nation.

But the challenge was that the two of them were a bit on the elderly side.

At the time of story today, Abraham was about 100 and Sarah about ninety.

Their spirits were willing, but their bodies were old, all dried up.

When Abraham heard the news that he would be a father,

the scripture says he "fell on his face and laughed." (Gen 17:17).

When Sarah heard the news while eavesdropping in on Abraham and God, she chuckled.

And when God asked why she laughed, she denied she ever giggled.

The novelist, Frederick Buechner, asks the question "*Why did these two old crocks laugh?*"

And then he answers:

*They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman
with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward.*

They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway.

They laughed because God seemed to believe it.

*They laughed because they half-believed it themselves.
They laughed because laughing felt better than crying.
They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true
they would truly have something to laugh about, and in the meanwhile it help them keep going'*
[Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper& Row, 1973), 25].

On first hearing, Sarah's laugh was perhaps one of embarrassment.
Perhaps the laugh was cynical and mocking.
Yet things changed with water in her womb, and with the child of promise on the way.
Her snide snicker was transformed into a joy-full, a hope full-belly laugh.
No wonder God wanted Sarah and father Abraham to call the child
"Isaac, the one who laughs."

IV. The Laughter of Isaac and God's Ongoing Wonder-Working, Water-Working Ways

This story isn't just a cute baby miracle story.
But it is a story that exemplifies how God has acted and always will act in
God's wonder-working, water-working ways.

In the New Testament, in the book of Romans,
the apostle Paul talks about what it means to have faith in Christ.
He does it in a peculiar way, however, by pointing way back to Abraham and Sarah,
and reminding us of the faith of that barren and aging couple –
who hoped against hope for life to come from their barren dying bodies.
Paul recalls how God then delivers Isaac the promised child of laughter.
And so early Christians were called to that kind of faith, hope against hope, life out of death,
joining themselves with Christ, rising from the abyss of death.
That is the good news that gives birth to us who gather around
the baptism basin this day. (Romans 4:18)

The biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, points out,
that the story of Isaac expresses the truth that is at the heart of the Christian faith.
Brueggemann insists:
"Life comes only through promise; and the promise comes only in the body of the hopeless ones."
[Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982)181-182]

In all of the water stories:
Creation, Noah, Sarah and Abraham, Exodus, Exile, Return from Exile,
Jesus birth, baptism, death and resurrection
In all the stories of baptism --
the grip of barrenness and hopelessness,
of injustice and isolation,
of violence and death is transformed by God's water work.
Life is new. Life is found. Life is poured out and lifted up.
People have hope.
Against all odds, we hope.

Dare we laugh in the face of death? We can laugh.

V. Today, What Good News Is at God's Laughing Waters?

Today, we come to the laughing waters of baptism.

We can say with Sarah "*God has made laughter for me.*" (Genesis 21:6)
and "*Is anything too wonderful for God?*" (Genesis 18:14)

Every time someone is baptized – child, youth, or adult –
we too enter the water again – we are called to remember *our own* baptisms.
Even if we never have been baptized or do not imagine we ever will be,
we are *still* invited to consider our lives as part of God's ongoing
unbelievable, too-wonderful-to -imagine, water-miracle of life -- and be joyful!
We join company and laugh with those who have come before us:
With Noah, Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, Moses and Miriam, the prophets,
With Mary, John the Baptist, a woman at the well, and Jesus. So many...

And yet, God's water work continues in our world now, today,
in this place, at this basin of water
and out there -- where people long
to splash around in God's promise that offers new life and hope.

Sarah considered "Is anything too wonderful for God?"
Today, at God's laughing waters of baptism, we ask:
"Is anything too wonderful for God?"

In an often hostile and resistant world,
we can laugh because today, Christine, Kala, and Susanna, a family that includes two mommies and
a sister bring their child and their brother, Isaac, to be baptized.
Is anything too wonderful for God?

When death is seen as final, we still rejoice.
Because today a little boy is baptized with the name "Isaac Len" honoring his grandfather, Kala's
father, named Leonard who died only weeks ago.
Is anything too wonderful for God?

When we are mixed-up, lost, overwhelmed with despair, or weighed down by our own failures, we are
still invited to party.
Today God sets everything aside and seeks us out like a lost sheep or a precious lost coin,
brings us home, sings, "I love you, you are mine," and then throws a party full of laughter.
Is anything too wonderful for God?

When war rages, when injustice and poverty flourishes, can we muster up any joy?
I think so when God's people, against all odds, get on board with God's impossible, laughable, work
of peace and compassion.
Is anything too wonderful for God?

When too often the world's children are neglected or abused,

Let us be relentless in guarding the laughter, the love, and the life of all God's children.
Is anything too wonderful for God?

This morning, Christine and Kala and Susanna brought their child of promise, Isaac,
to the laughing bowl, not asking, but rather proclaiming "Is anything too wonderful for God?"

They came to the laughing waters with a prayer for Isaac that they wrote themselves.
Listen to their prayer:

*"Isaac, we pray that in your journey of life you find happiness and love.
We pray that you come to know God and feel God's powerful love and compassion.
We pray that you find joy and laughter in the wondrous world God has created
and seek God in everyone you meet.
May Jesus inspire you to seek justice for the least among us and
share God's love with the world around you."*

On this day of Isaac's baptism,
your prayer, our prayers, have only begun to be answered.
Is anything too wonderful for God?

VI. The Invitation: Get Wet and Laugh!

God and Isaac invited us this day to these laughing waters.
With Isaac, get wet and laugh!

God is doing a new thing, a good thing, a thing of hope.
God has given another child of promise to the world
and we have made promises:

We have promised that
 against all odds, no matter what the future holds
 to support Isaac, to support laughter.
We have promised to this child of promise
 to nurture Isaac, to nurture laughter, to nurture God's laugh.

People of Hope, Children of Hope, get wet and laugh!