

Laughter is the best medicine

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on June 14th, 2026 – Genesis 18:1-15 & 21:1-7)

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My grandfather was a funny man, quick witted and with a very dry sense of humour. He used to get a book/magazine each week or month, whenever it came out, some of you might remember it - Reader's Digest, it is still around today. In it there was a section called 'Laughter is the best medicine', I used to read only that section of his copy.

As a kid, he would tease me all the time. He had two tricks that would always have me laughing, sometimes even falling around the floor in fits of laughter. I would know he was about to tickle my feet and yet I was never ready and he would tickle them until I was screaming with laughter. His other trick was to put sugar in his cup of tea and then with the back of his spoon (after he cooled it down) he would touch my hand with it. I knew it was coming every time; I anticipated it every time, but it always caught me out and we would both just laugh and laugh.

What makes you laugh? Do you have a favourite comedian - I saw Sammy J in concert earlier this year and he was hilarious. I think I like the political jokes he makes along the way. But I also like Shaun Micallef and Dawn French.

Perhaps it is the absurd things you see in nature that make you laugh. Or maybe watching a child play or answer a question.

A good laugh, chuckle, snigger is good for you.

Sarah laughed.

Sarah is married to Abraham. She is quite old in this story. They are quite wealthy, in part because Abraham exploited her beauty, passed her off as his sister and gave her to be part of the harem of the Pharaoh when they lived in Egypt. This led to him to coming into possession of sheep, cattle and slaves. The one thing they didn't have was children, well Abraham did, he had a child called Ishmael by their slave Hagar, but Sarah had not been able to have children. Being childless back then, was thought to be problematic, somehow God hadn't been kind to you. Compounding this problem was they had been promised by God, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, as many as the stars in the sky or grains of sand on the beach, but alas, they did not have children.

Sarah though, is just as flawed as us all, we will read further in the book of Genesis about her appalling treatment of Hagar, but more of that another day.

Listening from the tent after she had baked the cakes to feed the visitors, she overhears the conversation they are having. She would within the year have a child, preposterous, at her age and stage of life, no wonder she laughed.

A female Rabbi¹ I read, doesn't believe she laughed to herself, rather she thinks Sarah let out a great big belly laugh, a laugh of absolute disbelief. She compares this to when Abraham laughs in Chapter 17, about exactly the same thing as Sarah is overhearing now, that she will have a baby in her old age, we are told he falls to his face laughing -

¹ D"Var Torah by Rabbi Elizabeth Dunsker, accessed from internet on June 9 2026

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raucous laughter, out loud laughter, laughing before God, not laughing to himself. The text, she is suggesting, makes it seem that Abraham's laughing is fine, is good whilst Sarah's laughing is on the 'naughty' side. She does not accept this, as they are laughing about exactly the same thing.

Sarah laughed.

She laughs in disbelief, but perhaps she is also secretly laughing with joy at the idea of having a child herself. She is a woman who had lost hope of ever having the very thing she wanted - a child. She is laughing with hope. Is she laughing at the idea that her pain and shame will be taken away - that would certainly have been something to delight in.

Whether she laughed to herself or indeed laughed out loud, one of the visitors overhears. They ask Abraham why she laughed - surely it is obvious!

Sarah has been caught out laughing and, like many of us would in that situation, she denies it. Then we have this delightful dialogue where there is, what I think is a bit of banter, rather than a telling off - no I didn't, oh yes you did, no I didn't, oh yes you did!

Along with the banter comes a truth - is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Is there?

Maybe Sarah doubted it for a bit, until her child Isaac arrives. Their response to this miracle in their midst, is to call the child Isaac. The name Isaac means laughter. She acknowledges that God has brought her laughter - in the form of a son and in the delight that will bring, bring not just her, but all who hear the story, her community and her descendants. Laughter has surrounded this story.

Laughter expressing disbelief, delight, hope and joy at a miracle.

Laughter is the best medicine in Sarah's case.

Nothing is too wonderful for God.

What can we take from this story?

Laughter is good medicine - it can bond us together; it can be a physical and psychological release. It can express delight, disbelief, joy and hope.

When I was a young teenager, I was fairly serious, and one of my youth group friends who as a real larrikin, he was always joking around gave me a poster for my bedroom wall. The poster was of raggedy Ann and Andy; they were dolls created by Johnny Gruelle in the 1910's as a way of keeping his daughter's memory alive as she had died as a child. They later became a book series, a film and a musical.

On the poster were the words - don't take yourself too seriously. My friend was reminding me to laugh, to laugh at myself, to laugh at life, to laugh at the crazy things that would happen to me as I journeyed through life.

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Let's go out into the world, sharing our laughter, helping one another to laugh and reminding all that nothing is too wonderful for God.

Laughter is often the best medicine. Amen.