

Laughter amid the thorns and gold

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 18 June 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 3 A

Genesis 18: 1-15; Contemporary Reading: *Sarah Laughed* by M. Suzanne Terry

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

*Maybe what she wanted to do was punch Him (God).
But she couldn't.
So Sarah laughed.*

Didn't Suzanne Terry put it well in her poem '*Sarah Laughed*'? How many of us have wanted to punch God, or worse, for what has happened, or not happened, to ourselves and others? In Genesis chapter 18, Sarah laughs out of her deep experiences of sorrow, anger, and utter frustration, with God. After all she has experienced, as a childless migrant woman, in an ancient patriarchal culture where child-bearing was so important, how dare God turn up and now declare fresh hope. Why take so long to give this gift? Why put Sarah through such trials? We can easily identify. As elsewhere in the Bible, we are not presented with a simple moral or spiritual inspiration. Rather we encounter a very human struggle, with which we are invited to wrestle. Suzanne Terry's poem is a product of this. For she wrote in response to a book entitled *Those Who Wait: Finding God in Disappointment, Doubt and Delay*. This, like other writings by Tanya Marlow, seeks to explore how we live with the realities of suffering...

Before reflecting specifically on Sarah's laughter, and Tanya Marlow's insights, it is perhaps helpful to remind ourselves of the nature of the Abraham and Sarah narratives. For, like other stories of the patriarchs in the Bible, these are neither straightforward records of our faith lineage, still less history as such. This is the clear conclusion of the search for the historical Abraham and Sarah which exercised many archaeologists, biblical scholars, and others, in the 20th century. There is now wide consensus that Abraham and Sarah were not historical figures at all, or at least as presented in the Bible. Instead, like the Exodus and Judges narratives, these stories are principally much later literary constructs of the 6th century before Christ.

This does not mean that there were not people called Abraham and Sarah in our Faith's formative past: only that we cannot recover their realities. Rather these stories are part of the re-forming of the peoples of Israel after the great upheavals of the Babylonian exilic era. Like all nations, they therefore drew together myth, legend, and history in creative acts of storytelling: seeking to affirm key values rather than literal facts. To a degree, we see this in Australia in the use of the Anzac story. So were Abraham and Sarah actual refugees, precariously seeking new life in a new land? Perhaps, but probably not: the people of Israel were probably most likely formed from various pre-existing Caananite and other cultures, rather than by outsiders coming in. Yet this does not invalidate the stories. For they affirm Israel's faith down the centuries, whose vital truths we inherit: that God, is typically found among the strangers and the outsiders, calling them into new life, and companioning them in uncertain pilgrim journeys on the way.

Like other biblical stories, the Abraham and Sarah narratives are also not intended to convey simple moral or religious teaching. Rather, as we put it in Pitt Street, we are to take these ancient Hebrew faith texts seriously, but not literally. Actually, that is how the ancients also would have primarily understood their value. We can see this in the New Testament, where St. Paul for example, in Galatians chapter 4, describes next week's lectionary story of Hagar, Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, as an allegory.

As many Christian theologians have done down the centuries, we can therefore similarly read today's text as a symbolic expression of Christian Faith: with God as Holy Trinity represented as three persons; Abraham and Sarah as a new Adam and Eve, and/or pre-figuring of Joseph and Mary, similarly gifted a child in surprising circumstances; like Moses, and Jesus, coming out of a land of oppression into freedom; and with the bitter laughter of disappointment and death ultimately turned into the laughter of resurrection and new life through God's grace. For such texts are an invitation to spiritual exploration, rather than literal or straightforward declarations of God.

So what might today's story say to us today? Let us return to the reflections of Tanya Marlow, intimately entwined in her own personal story. For she is a former Christian ministry teacher, and also a Church of England vicar's wife, who from her late teens has suffered from severe M.E, known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in Australia. The most devastating outbreak of her chronic illness came with her baby's birth, after which she found she could neither stand up nor even hold her child.

She learned, she says, the awful reality of suffering, and, in it, the silence of God. She could truly identify with Sarah, and with others in the Bible who, like Job, struggled with seemingly meaningless suffering and consequent difficulties of faith and hope. Tanya thus expresses empathic understanding with Sarah's bitter, even cynical, laughter. For she herself has argued and argued with God about her and others' pain and experienced deep frustration in waiting on God in prayer.

However, as Tanya herself puts it, she is also a living paradox that healing beyond ordinary human hope does in fact happen. When she was only six days old, she suffered a brain haemorrhage and was rushed by her non-churchgoing parents to Great Ormond Street, the famous leading children's hospital in London. There the expert doctors all agreed in pronouncing that Tanya would either die or, at very best, never live to be able to read or write. All they could suggest was prayer. Prayer worked. Healing prayer can indeed sometimes surprise, even radically physically, as well as spiritually. Yet Tanya herself does not seek that kind of prayer for herself but rather seeks, as she puts it, to live in acceptance rather than in hope. In this, whether or not healing prayer 'works' for us or others, she invites us all to find gold amid the thorns of life. ⁱⁱ

If we avoid the trap of seeking historical 'proofs' for faith in the Bible, and the traps of seeking either false piety or beating ourselves up for our limitations, we too can similarly use stories like those of Sarah and Abraham to find gold. Our lives, like that of Sarah, are full of thorns: a biblical metaphor for suffering. Yet we have a choice about how we handle suffering. This is part of authentic faith.

For as Dorothy L. Sayers put it, Christianity does not give us a supernatural (that is, a more than natural) explanation for suffering. Those who seek to give us one usually do indeed leave us wanting to punch God, or worse. But Christianity does give us a supernatural use for suffering. For as Job puts it (Job 23.10), in God's grace and presence, after I have been tested, "*I will come forth as gold.*"

One of the haunting lines in Genesis chapter 18 is the question *'Is anything too wonderful for God?'* The temptation of piety is simply to answer *'no'*. However the heart of biblical faith, is surely to live with that question. For, like Sarah, and Tanya Marlow, and so many people struggling with all kinds of suffering, God often does not appear to want to answer in a hurry. Authentic faith, in that sense, does not seek easy answers, but lives with the mystery, in which, as our text puts it *'in due season'*, there may come realisation of long postponed hope, or there may not. Even among the thorns however we may still find gold.

We can easily give up on faith, Tanya Marlow says, as many do, angry or disillusioned with God. That is understandable, and we need to express our anger with God. As a Catholic friend said, at Reflect and Connect the other day, *'sometimes WTF is the truest prayer'*. Yet, says Tanya, two things may encourage us to persist in faith, and, thereby, find gold among the thorns. The first is that, as with Sarah, Ruth, Job, and many other narratives, the Bible is full of stories similar to our own sufferings. It is also full of laments, and anger and frustration towards God, not least in the psalms. From these we can gather strength. Secondly, when we walk through suffering, we have a choice. Do we want to struggle with this on our own, or do we choose to struggle through it with God, and with others who are walking through their own suffering with God too?

Another hard-won offering from Tanya Marlow relates to the picture on our pew sheet this morning (*Lady in Red* by the British abstract painter Martin Bush). When people visit, they encounter two paintings in Tanya's living room. The first is a fluid, fun picture of the local town, and visitors look and say how nice it is. The other puzzles them, and, after a while, they ask about it. When told it is called *'Lady in Red'*, they say *'oh'*.

Gradually they then make some sense of the passionate swirls and energy around the lady in red. They stare harder. Some still do not like it. But when stopping longer, most find it more rewarding, if more demanding, than the instantly-accessible landscape. That is the kind of art that the Bible, and Christian Faith, are at their best. If we want simple answers, or straightforward explanations of origins and purpose, look elsewhere. But if we stay longer, looking more deeply, and allowing the mystery in them to look more deeply at us, then we find much gold among the thorns, more rewarding though more demanding.

This brings us back, in conclusion, to Sarah and her laughter. For Sarah famously laughs twice in Genesis. The first time she laughs bitterly, out of her suffering and anger with God and her husband. Yet when her child is born, she laughs again, and this time with joy: gold amid the thorns. Maybe this transition is prompted by her dialogue with God in our story today. For, when questioned about why she laughed, Sarah denies she had laughed at all. As the text says, *'for she was afraid'*.

Sarah is perhaps still clinging, even in her bitter laughter, to an understanding of God as a power over her, a power with the freedom to prolong or end her suffering. Only when she lets go of her fear, and understands that God is not power over but power with her does she discover the capacity for new life. Such a God is not a force from which she needs to hide, or lie, but a true companion who may not be able simply to *'fix'* her issues, but who journeys with her, bearing her best and worst, enabling discovery of gold amid the thorns. Such a companion can bear our rages, our frustrations, our bitter laughter, for they share in our sufferings, and seek with us the laughter of heaven.

In the name of Christ, who suffers with us and invites us into resurrection laughter.

ⁱ <https://msuzanneterry.com/2018/12/07/sarah-laughed-a-poem-for-this-advent/>

ⁱⁱ See further Tanya's website: <https://tanyamarlow.com/about-me/>