

Of course she laughed!

A homily on Genesis 18:1–15 and 21:1

Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau

The audacity of God's promise

Of course she laughed! A baby birthed by her ninety-year-old body. The impossibility of it all.

Twenty-five years earlier, she and Abram left their wealth and life in the land of Ur. It's only been twenty-five years, but it feels like a lifetime. When they left Ur, she had already carried the shame and sorrow of infertility. It marked her then at the age of sixty-five; it marks her now at the age of ninety. That shame and sorrow never goes away; rather, it is woven into the fabric of her life.

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She recalled how the shame and sorrow of infertility allowed her body to be passed off as a sister, not a wife. She cannot forget how she was given to other men when she and Abram were refugees. The shame and sorrow turned into bitterness that even after *that* the joy of children was not hers, and she was only getting older. That bitterness so possessed her that she dominated another woman's body, giving that woman to her own husband—never asking for consent, just as her own had never been sought.

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When that woman, Hagar, became pregnant, her shame and bitterness only deepened, and the woman whose life she already controlled became her punching bag. She heaped abuse onto Hagar—so great was her

own pain—but it did not help relieve anguish. Instead, it only increased it. There are some wounds that are so intractable—there is some shame that is so permanent—that finally the only way left to face it is to laugh.

Yet God appears to her in the form of these three strangers. In their voices, there are echoes of the divine promise for this woman. She is a woman so bold for ever believing the promise in the first place, so broken from such deep sorrow, and yet to be blessed with her very heart's desire.

God comes to her even though she terrorized another woman. God comes to her not because she has learned something from her suffering and not because she has repented for her sin of oppressing Hagar.

Rather God comes to her because that is who God is: a God who always comes to us where we are—with all we've done—asking us again and again to join in the creation of blessing, to participate in the making of our hearts' deepest desires.

But it will demand all of Sarah. There is no way to bear this blessing without the birthing, which every mother knows at some point feels like dying. The primal forces that will never be controlled but can only be joined by breathing through and pushing beyond that point that feels like dying into the joy of new life.

Standing there hearing the audacity of this promise, knowing what her ninety-year-old body would be required to do, of course she laughed!

But when that laughter was heard and named, she denied it.

"I did not laugh," she said.

God replied, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

There is no wiggling out.

There's no denial.

There's no hiding.


All of who we are and what we have done is visible to God. God bears that truth and uncompromisingly insists that we bear that truth also. This is not to crush us but to empower us for the birthing that is to come.

The divine midwife

Friends, we who are white are experiencing the need for feverish activity in the heat of these days, and there is no age exception. Messengers are coming to us and challenging us these days to bear the truth of our shame, our silence, our privilege, and our complicity with systems that oppress. We dare not laugh it off. We must dare to do the work of relearning the history of this country. We must dare to use resources like the *1619 Project*

in the *New York Times Magazine*, which marks the four-hundred-year history of slavery in this nation.¹

For those of us who are white, this reading may feel like dying. Opening ourselves to stories and traditions and music and wisdom of our African American brothers and sisters may feel threatening. Releasing the



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power we currently hold may feel frightening. And God is with us, a divine midwife to this “labor of love” in which we will breathe and push through that which feels like dying into the joy of new life. For all of us! For every one of us! For us all together!²

Friends, as we join God in this birthing process, be assured there is laughter on the other side of this birth: the laughter of unbridled joy at the miracle we will hold in our arms, arms that are made to be linked with all our human

and non-human siblings even as we are held by our Divine Mother. This is our fierce, tender Divine Mother who will not deny any of her children from being carried by the river of the water of life.³

Amen.

About the author

Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau is part of the pastoral team at Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana.

1 Jake Silverstein writes that the essays are “on different aspects of contemporary American life, from mass incarceration to rush-hour traffic, that have their roots in slavery and its aftermath. Each essay takes up a modern phenomenon, familiar to all, and reveals its history.” See Jake Silverstein, “Why We Published *The 1619 Project*,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine/1619-intro.html>.

2 See Valarie Kaur, “3 Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage,” TEDWomen2017, https://www.ted.com/talks/valarie_kaur_3_lessons_of_revolutionary_love_in_a_time_of_rage.

3 This is a reference to an image of the River of the Water of Life, which was used in the worship videos for Eighth Street from Pentecost through the month of June.