

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
15 June 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
First Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

***“This is Us: Laughing at the Unbelievable
This is Good News: The Unbelievable Has the Last(ing) Laugh”***

First Sermon in the Summer Series: *This is Us: Seeing Ourselves in Scripture...Reflecting Good News in our Lives*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Genesis 18:9-15; 21:1-7

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Any fans here of the beloved TV show *This Is Us*? It ended in 2022, but you can binge watch it now if you wish.

What makes the show so powerful is that the heartwarming and heartbreaking stories of the three generations of the Pearson family are told through non-linear storylines. The story moves backwards and forwards in time. You scenes of the characters from childhood to senior adulthood to adolescence to middle age and you're always zig-zagging through these life stages with them, never quite having the full arc of their story as the scenes play out. Often something happens in an episode which leaves you asking why or how. And you're on the edge of your seat waiting to find out in what life stage will you get the answer to the character's question. And when the answer does come—in a flash-forward or flashback—well, it shifts the audience's entire perception

about what is happening to the character 'now' in the scene they are watching. A trauma from childhood allows you to understand a reaction they are having as an adult. Or a flash forward to a future relationship that looks healthy gives a breath of hope to a moment on screen as a younger version of the character is unraveling in an unhealthy relationship before your eyes. It definitely keeps you hooked! And I think it's what allows the viewers to relate and see ourselves as part of the "us" in *This is Us*. Because we, too, live our lives forward, but understand them backwards, as the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard says.

This is Us is not unlike the Bible, which is a collection of stories about people trying to make sense of the circumstances of their lives in non-linear ways, and as new layers are added on, new understanding and insight is gained.

So often in these biblical stories we just get a glimpse of someone's life, a momentary peak into their "now," and then we're invited to imagine a fuller picture of how that one moment in their life connects to the fuller story of their life and even to the moments of *our* lives.

This is partially what makes the Bible inspired. Because it helps us *see ourselves in scripture* and think, yes "*this is me, this is us.*" In fact, even if we just get one or two scenes of a character's life, it's often enough for us to connect with them. We know just enough to think, "*Yeah, I've been There,*" or somewhere near 'There' at least.

This summer we'll be looking at key characters in scripture who face pivotal moments in their lives and how they respond. We'll get curious about how we can connect to their emotions and reactions and learn something about the journey of faith. In all the messiness, and ordinariness, and extraordinariness of "This is Us," *there is always* Good News.

Today we begin with Sarah, one of the matriarchs of our faith. We meet her in a surprising moment as she learns from a "stranger" that she will bear a child in her old age. This is Unbelievable News to her that seems completely bogus, irrational, and—quite honestly—painfully insulting.

So, Sarah laughs. And in *this* case, we know from the Hebrew root, *tsâchaq*¹, that this laughter is a jesting, mocking laugh, that can be given in a moment merriment or scorn, pleasure or derision. It depends on the context. And the context here is not a giggle, fun-loving kind of laugh. It's a sarcastic, cynical under her breath, "who does this guy think he is?" kind of laugh. A bitter laugh. It's a laughter of the absurd and ridiculous. A "you've got to be kidding me" kind of laugh.

This is the kind of "laugh" millions expressed yesterday in the *No Kings March* in all 50 states as the President held an ostentatious \$25-45 billion-dollar military parade. As one woman's sign said (a woman who was wearing patriotic red, white, and blue stars and stripes): "*I'm 95 years old and*

¹ Strong's definition of *tsâchaq*:
blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h6711/kjv/wlc/0-1/.

I'm here to say that THIS is not the American Way!" Her smile and humor on her sign indicated a "laugh" that said, "I won't stand for ridiculous showmanship or harmful policies or for theocracy and autocracy masking as democracy.

This is Sarah and This is *Us* in moments like these—moments of disbelief and incredulity, moments when Truth is Stranger than Fiction—we ***Laugh at the Unbelievable***.

So let's take a closer look at Sarah to see if we can take a closer look at ourselves. Why is she laughing? Why is this whole encounter so unbelievable?

Sarah's husband, Abraham is hosting three visitors in their home, and he's just asked Sarah to make some cakes while he goes outside to ask someone to prepare a calf for the main course. Once everything's prepared, Abraham sets the meal before the three guests and then stands under a nearby tree as they eat. Abraham knows these three guys represent the Lord, but Sarah doesn't. This is where our text picks up today.

The three visitors look up from their meal and ask, "*Where is*

your wife, Sarah?" Abraham says, "she's in the tent." And she's listening in of course, as one would be want to do! Then one of the strangers says, "*your wife Sarah will have a son,*" and it's at that point that Sarah—not knowing the strangers are the Lord—laughs and mutters to herself, "*I'm old, my husband is old, there's no way that is possible.*"

Her laugh is bitter and sarcastic, even cynical you might say. And how can you blame her?

First, she had longed for a child for decades. This is actually not funny at all. It's painful. The longing was deep; it's like pouring salt on a wound for this guy to say she's gonna have a child. Does he not think they've tried...for years? Sarah's laughter is born of bitter grief; after all, in Genesis 16, we learn she resorted to extreme measures of allowing Abraham to sleep with Hagar. That's how deep this desire was to have a son.

Second, it's way too late and physically impossible for her to have a child. Sarah knows what's what with her body. She's long past menopause. She's old. Abe is old. So her laughter is cynical, unwilling to

believe the unbelievable, the ridiculous, unwilling to accept something so contrary to her own real-life experience and, quite frankly, her intelligence.

And this all begs the question, *who do these strangers think they are?* Well, as the readers, we know they represent God (and so does Abraham), but Sarah *doesn't* know that—and not only that, we have no indication that she even knows that God has been promising Abraham lots and lots of children for decades!

We have no textual evidence that Sarah knew that the Lord had promised Abraham that he would be fruitful and multiply. Sarah has not been privy to all these promises of God to Abraham:

- Genesis 12:2—*"I will make of you a great nation,"*
- Genesis 13:14-16—*"I will make your offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth,"*
- Genesis 15:5-6—*"Look up at the sky and count the stars...So shall your offspring be,"*
- not to mention specifically in Genesis 17:15-17—God says to Abraham, *"As for Sarah your wife...I will bless her and will surely give you a*

son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations..." To which Abraham falls facedown; laughing himself, saying *"Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"* Let the record show—Abraham laughed in disbelief at this news long before Sarah did!

We can imagine that maybe Abraham didn't tell Sarah these promises because it would have been painful; perhaps he tried to protect her from that.

But, for the sake of argument, let's say Sarah DID know about them. If she did that would make this encounter today Promise #5! And Promises 1-4 had not come true. As Kristine Gift points out, "If Sarah had been aware of 'the promise of fruitfulness' it makes even more sense to interpret her laughter as incredulous and bitter. Abraham and Sarah left their homeland when Abraham was 75 years old, and in Genesis 17 it's mentioned that Abraham is 99 years old; so for 24 years Abraham and Sarah have been waiting for God's promise to Abraham of 'a great nation' to be fulfilled...By the time Sarah laughs in Genesis 18, the

promise has been repeated four times, and still there is no child...If Abraham had shared all the previous promise with his wife, then this fifth one would [ring pretty hollow and empty].”²

It would be naïve and foolish of Sarah to believe that somehow *this* time would be different.

Sarah’s cynical, nervous laughter is understandable. Psychologists tell us that nervous laughter happens when we subconsciously try to protect ourselves from harm, shock, disbelief, or dismay.

Nervous laughter is a defense mechanism to regulate emotion when we’re sad or upset. The thinking is: our brains remember that laughter feels good so when something doesn’t feel good, we automatically laugh trying to make ourselves feel better.³

As one Neuroscientist says, “laughter helps us heal from trauma by distracting ourselves from the pain and associating that pain with positive emotion. This could be why nervous

laughter can happen even at funerals or other sad and traumatic events.”⁴ It also occurs when we encounter illogical information or confusing behavior; the laughter helps us release the anxiety, fear, or stress that is rising within us; it keeps us from getting over-whelmed, providing a release to get us back to homeostasis.

Of course, the stranger (i.e. Lord)—not knowing about the psychology of laughter—says to Abraham, “*Why did she laugh? Is anything too wonderful* (which is also translated as “*difficult*” in the Hebrew⁵) *for the Lord?*” and then he repeats the promise of Sarah having a son.

Shen then denies her response: “*I didn’t laugh!*” Why? Maybe because she feels seen or ‘called out’ or maybe she was beginning to pick up on that maybe this guy knew something she didn’t know or maybe he was divine in some way—to which the Lord (who knows all) replied, “*Yes you **did** laugh.*”

² Kristine Gift, “Sarah’s Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy: An Interpretation of Genesis 18:9-15,” (Coe College, 2012), pg 102. Accessed on June 15, 2025 at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://research.monm.edu/mjur/files/2012/2012-6.pdf>.

³ Tim Jewell, “What Causes Nervous Laughter?” *Healthline* (31 May 2023), accessed on June 15, 2025 at <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/nervous-laughter>.

⁴ Jewell, *ibid*.

⁵ Strong’s definition of *pālā’*: blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h6381/kjv/wlc/0-1/

Yikes! Nothing like being called out in the midst of your insecurities and confusion and doubt. I really feel for Sarah in this moment. It's so human.

The Lord sees Sarah though, and hears her bitter, cynical, nervous laughter. God always sees ALL of us. All that we're feeling, processing, and thinking. And that's okay. Sarah's laughter doesn't change God's response. If anything, it expedites God's action. For decades nothing had been happening with this "promise," but as soon as she laughs cynically, it seems to actually begin to move the needle a bit on this promise, right?! Food for thought. But I digress.

The issues here is the profound gulf, the "absurd disproportion" between the divine promise and human possibility that Sarah experiences.⁶

Promises and platitudes in the midst of hardship are hard. Especially when they turn up empty. I have no doubt this has probably happened in your life.

Someone promised something to you, and they didn't follow through. Or, perhaps it feels like

Life or God has broken 'unspoken' promises to you.

Maybe certain trials or griefs or suffering seem too much for you or simply too unfair for your loved one. We think we should be able to live without suffering and death and struggle. In these situations, like Sarah, it feels like the promise of God to "be with us" is so empty and barren because how we imagine God being with us *is not how it actually is* for God to be with us. God says "*I am with you no matter what happens, in life and death; nothing can separate you from my love, not nakedness or persecution or peril or sword*" (Romans 8) yet we want "God is with us" to mean "*I will protect you and harm won't come your way and everything will work out in your life as you expect it to and you won't face nakedness or persecution or peril or sword or suffering.*" Do you see the difference?

It's really difficult to realize that the purpose of our faith is not to make our life easier or take away pain, grief, or hardship. The purpose of faith and connection with God and community is to remind us we are not alone as we get through

⁶ Dan Clendenin, "God Has Brought Me Laughter," *Journey with Jesus* (11 June 2017), accessed on June 15,

2025 at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1411-god-has-brought-me-laughter>.

pain, grief, and hardship. And that pain and suffering do not define our lives or our story. We know that our present moment—our NOW—however difficult—is not the lasting moment. As the saying goes, “*Everything will be okay in the end. If not’s okay, it’s not the end.*”⁷ We have a lasting vision, a great imagination, that is God’s imagination of what this hope looks like, what the kingdom of God looks like.

But I wonder today, as we think about Sarah’s self-protective, cynical laughter at The Unbelievable—*when and where do you feel that kind of laughter surfacing within you?*

What hope, dream, prayer, issue, or cause in your life feels utterly barren? So impossible? Like you have been hoping and praying for this “thing” (whatever it is) for so long and you’ve just become jaded and cynical to any possibility other than what your life experience has shown you to be true?

Where in your life have you written off hope because it’s too painful to keep hoping?

Maybe it’s a loved one who has been in substance abuse recovery and relapsed and relapsed again and relapsed again. You want to hope for change, and they say, “*I’m going back to rehab and this time will be different; I promise. Or I just need a little bit of money to get me through this situation, but I promise I won’t ask again.*” But you find yourself with that bitter laughter under your breath, not wanting it to be true, but knowing it’s never different. The relapse always comes. Despite your deepest desires for them, you stop hoping to protect yourself.

Or maybe you’ve fallen into cynicism about our country and world. What is “freedom of speech” when protestors are policed by our own military? Or why trust that the government is making decisions in the best interest of its citizens when according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the cost of the military parade yesterday in D.C. could have paid for a year of disability for 7,000 military veterans or funded Medicaid coverage for 15,000 children or fed 18,000 people through SNAP?⁸

⁷ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2023/01/01/everything-ok/>

⁸ Lindsey Shelton, “5 things \$45 million could pay for instead of a massive military parade,” *SPLCenter.org* (6

June 2025), accessed on June 15, 2025 at <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hopewatch/5-things-washington-military-parade/>.

Or, even, why be Christian in a time when Christian Nationalists are equating the name of Christ with bigotry and hate and wielding Scripture as a weapon to promote policies that harm and exclude rather than heal and include?

This week I fielded questions around Calvary being a Baptist church. Someone who is connected to one of our rental partners wrote and asked that partner if it is safe for queer people here. When they saw the Baptist name on our building, they immediately felt unsafe. Their experience is one of Baptists = LGBTQIA+ hatred and discrimination. And who can blame them, especially with statements like those coming out from the Southern Baptist Convention this week wanting to take away the rights of the queer community? Of course, we at Calvary detest and denounce such statements but you can see why people equate the Christian or Baptist name with anything other than the love of Christ!?

Why would anyone have hope that these things would or could change, when the only life experience they have is telling them the opposite?

You see, there's nothing wrong with Sarah's cynical laughter or with ours. We're not meant to just hope naively that things will be different or just ignore science or the dire and threatening circumstances of our lives.

Yet what we must guard against, is letting that kind of laughter be our only response—or—our *lasting* one. Bitterness, grief, cynicism, and sarcasm—they cause us to shut down, turn away, and walk away. Or simply give up. Our faith proclaims a deeper truth...even in seasons of “long defeat.”

Dr. Paul Farmer was a man who hoped to “cure the world.” He specialized in infectious diseases and labored tirelessly to rid the whole world of such diseases as AIDS and TB. Farmer often talked about the concept of The Long Defeat. One day in an interview he is questioned about the logic of spending so much time, effort and money on one young patient knowing that the likelihood of his survival was slim at best. His response was: “*How about if I say, I have fought for my whole life a long defeat. How about that? How about if I said, that's all it adds up to is*

defeat? ...I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win. I don't dislike victory [but it is never guaranteed, nor is it the lasting point or purpose]... ”⁹

“Farmer’s convictions to serve the poor, especially in Haiti but also other places around the world, met with opposition and criticism of all kinds. But he pressed on convinced that he was doing the right thing. [His outlook helps us all] continue to do what is right—in spite of the consequences, in spite of the criticism, in spite of the opposition, in spite of the long defeat, not only because we sometimes see victories, but simply because it is right!”¹⁰

We are not expected to win, we are only expected to fight. And everyone can fight. And the amount of impact we can have in the world can be unfathomable, unbelievable even! Dr. Farmer acknowledged that he lost the big fight against the health-care inequalities in

the world...He knows that although he is fighting a long defeat against saving *everyone* who can be saved, along the way he is leaving a path of small victories that means *everything* to the individuals he *is* able to save. He said, “The task then is not to be a winner, but to be a fighter. And fight the long defeat. Luckily, a fighter is something I, and anyone else, can be.”¹¹

Paul Farmer got this phrase, “the long defeat” from his favorite book, *The Lord of the Rings*, where Galadriel says, “Through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.” Galadriel was from the imagination of JRR Tolkien, who once wrote in a letter to a friend, “*I am a Christian...so [based on the life of Jesus] I do not expect history to be anything but a long defeat though it contains some samples or glimpses of final victory.*”¹² And that’s where we come alive, and where we must dwell...in those glimpses!

In our seasons of “long defeat,”

⁹ David Hayward, “Mountains Beyond Mountains and the “Long Defeat” *Patheos.com* (14 Feb. 2025), accessed on June 15, 2025 at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nakedpastor/2006/05/mountains-beyond-mountains-and-the-long-defeat/>.

¹⁰ Hayward, *ibid*.

¹¹ Efraín Torres, “Losing Can Change The World,” *Medium* (1 May 2020), accessed on June 15, 2025 at <https://etorrjr10.medium.com/losing-can-change-the-world-aa6b80f8c003>.

¹² “The Long Defeat” a sermon by The Rev. Ken Carter, Providence UMC, Charlotte, NC, April 17, 2011.

we keep laughing, in cynicism perhaps or bitterness or fatigue or grief, but all the while still trusting that God's kin-dom has the 'last laugh' if you will. That God, in ways beyond what we will ever understand, is still at work in our world and in our lives and will bring us to a deeper and last level of laughter, joy, grace, and freedom.

I think you have showed up today because you hope for this to be true or long for it to be true. And you know somehow in some way, *your life* is a part of what makes it true. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. You know that there is possibility and mystery in the world beyond what our own life experience shows us. This is the hope of the Resurrection. This is the Good News of everyday surprises and miracles.

In the end, even though Sarah laughs at the Unbelievable, it is the Precise Unbelievable Thing that she laughed at—the thing that she thought was impossible and could never happen would never happen—that gets the “last laugh” or the “lasting laugh.” Sarah gives birth to a son: Isaac, whose very name means laughter. In Genesis 21 she says, “*God has brought laughter for me;*

everyone who hears will laugh with me—do you see how she invites us into her laughter, into her experience and joy?—...*who would have ever thought that I would have a son, yet I did,*” (Gen. 21:6-7, para.) She is inviting us, come and sit and stay a while. Experience my joy. Dwell here with me.

The Unbelievable Happens for Sarah, and of course, when it does, she *can't help* but believe it to be true because now THAT IS her life experience. That is the Good News of the Reality of her life; it's no longer just an outlandish comment that makes no sense...it is actually the truth of her experience. And she wants us to taste that truth too. And know it is for us as well.

Interestingly, the word for laughter in this portion of the text takes on the meaning of joy and delight—it's the kind of laughter that we think of as filling our lives and bringing us to life. By naming her son *Isaac*, which means Laughter, Sarah's laughter lives on forever as a legacy—for the entire people of God! Isaac is the father of generations of God's people to come. And his name and origin story hold both the bitter laughter and the joyful laughter; he's a testimony or witness to

how God does do remarkable things in the world. Or even just how sometimes remarkable things happen beyond explanation. And sometimes remarkable things happen because remarkable people do not give up or give in.

In the hardships of our life and in the deep griefs and tragedies—it is so easy to say, *“nothing will change”* or *“God doesn’t care”* or *“the world is doomed.”*

There is a place for our bitter laughter and cynical responses, but if that becomes the response that takes residence in our heart then there is no room for the kin-dom of God to take root. Because remember, where does Jesus say the kin-dom of God is? Within you! (Luke 17) Within me. Within us. What we dwell on matters, for it is where the kin-dom of God begins!

All of us can think of times in our life when God has surprised us. Life has surprised us. People have surprised us.

Perhaps a friend or child that you thought would never change, could never change, actually decided to go to therapy and work on themselves and now decades after you have

written them off, is finally ready for a relationship?

Or you know, think about this: people who are in the midst of wars, never think they will end, because the trauma is unending. But then, one day, they do end. I remember this feeling powerfully as we spoke with people in the Republic of Georgia who used to be under Russian rule. They never thought they’d see their independence like they have now. Is it easy to rebuild? Not at all. It’s been difficult. Is their freedom under threat again? Absolutely. But they are living in this season of independence that they literally thought might never come, but it did. As one Georgian said, even if this is momentary, it’s still a moment that matters. It’s everything to us. It’s our live. Our freedom. Our worthiness and truth.

Their story is the story that gives people in Ukraine hope, children in Gaza hope, people suffering under authoritarian fear hope, even here in the United States, hope.

Or what about THE miracle story from the news this week?

After Air India Flight 171 crashed and burned, one

passenger in Seat 11A—
Viswash Kumar Ramesh, age
38—lived to tell the tale, a
survival nothing short of a
miracle. He walked away from
the crash site, from burned
wreckage and carnage only with
a slight limp.¹³

The miracle of one person
surviving doesn't take away the
tragedy of 241 people dying.
But likewise, the tragedy of 241
dying, does not take away the
miracle of 1 person surviving.

Life is full of moments like this
if we have eyes to see. Moments
of the 1. The 1 that doesn't
make sense. That 1 that defies
all odds. That 1 that surprises.
We do not live our lives
expecting to be the 1, but we
also tell the story of the 1 when
it happens to us because it
matters. When life surprises us
or unexpected Good News
surfaces in our story, must tell
the story and bear witness. Not
matter how big or small the
moment is. It reminds us that
there is more at work than just
what our brains can explain or
what our limited life experience
tells us is possible.

This is our hope and belief and
faith, friends. That as we hold
steady in our faith and in our
advocacy and work, that things
will change. And do change.
And even if they do not, it's
worth the effort. Because the
effort itself, is the co-creating of
the kin-dom of God. So within
us we keep the dream alive, the
light burning, the laughter
stirring, the hope brewing.

My favorite part of this story is
that Sarah didn't have to change
in order for God to bring about
this child. God did The Thing
even though Sarah didn't
believe it could happen.

The Good News of today's text
is that God's promises, God's
work in the world does not
depend upon whether we
believe it's possible or not. The
Unbelievable doesn't need our
Belief in order for it to happen.

There were "believed" to be no
survivors of the plane crash, but
lo and behold, there was
Viswash Kumar Ramesh
walking around, alive!

The Unbelievable does not *need*
our belief to happen, but when it
does happen, the Unbelievable

¹³ Antoinette Redford, Esha Mitra, Aditi Sangal, and
Michael Rios, "A miracle in seat 11A: What we know
about the sole survivor of Air India crash Vishwash
Kumar Ramesh," *CNN World India* (13 June 2025),

accessed on June 15, 2025 at
<https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/12/india/air-india-crash-survivor-vishwash-kumar-ramesh-intl-latam>.

needs our testimony, and our witness to its truth and reality. This is how hope lives. How the vision stays alive. How our laughter stays joyful, rather than bitter or cynical.

Sarah naming Isaac “laughter” becomes an image for generations to come; a story of hope we still tell today.

What are the stories of God’s faithfulness and improbable grace that you are telling in and through your life?

How are we as the Christian Church countering the narrative that God doesn’t exist or that justice, peace, inclusivity, and love are not possible?

These Good News stories do happen, and if we don’t tell the stories of that goodness, the other stories will always be louder.

“Is anything too wonderful (or difficult) for the Lord?” No.

And not for us either.
Whether we believe it or not.

Amen.