Sometimes you just have to laugh.

Our story today from the Book of Genesis is laughable. Just before this in chapter 17, Abraham laughs when God tells him he will have a son in his old age. And when I say old age, I mean Abraham is 100 years old and his wife Sarah is 90. Abraham flings himself on the ground at this word from God and belly laughs. That’s sort of what it says. And wouldn’t you?

But God is relentless. The Lord, we are told, shows up at Abraham’s tent under the oaks at Mamre. Abraham sees three visitors, but before long, it’s clear he is hosting the one God. The promise of a son is made again, but this time Sarah is eavesdropping on the conversation and she’s the one who laughs.

From our pious perches it might be easy to blame Abraham and Sarah for laughing at the promise of God. But again, wouldn’t you? If we step back and think about it though, before you can get to holy laughter—the kind that comes from belief, you might have to pass through the laughter of disbelief. Before the laughter of astonishment at the unexpected coming to be is the laughter of the absurd at the very idea of it.

This whole scene is so like God and so unlike us. The Bible is a story of God starting out with nothing and making something. We believe in moving from something to something. God saves the world from the bottom up. We always want to work from the top down.

Take our trickle-down economics, so consistently discredited. It has never worked, but we think it should, so we keep doubling down on it. If we keep cutting taxes on large corporations, they will see to it that the poor do better, too. They will create jobs, raise wages, spread the wealth around. Surely, companies won’t just buy back their own stock, pay their executives more, hold down
wages of low-income workers and even move manufacturing offshore to increase profits at the expense of local communities and their workers. Surely not.

God plants a seed in an old barren woman and makes a nation. God doesn't go to a young fertile woman with eleven children and declare that she will have a twelfth. God starts with zero and ends with multitudes.

The first laughter then is the honest laughter at this kind of strategy that can hardly be believed because of our limited imagination. And it's okay to start there. I mean, the laughter of this old couple only heightens the power of God in the story.

Take Sarah’s laughter, for instance. In Robert Alter’s translation of the text, it says: “And Sarah laughed inwardly, saying, ‘After being shriveled, shall I have pleasure, and my husband is old?’” I hate to be indelicate here, but the text itself is suggestive, so bear with me—pun intended, don’t you know?!

The word pleasure in the Hebrew is ednah, which is a cognate of Eden, as in Garden of Eden. Alter says it’s probably a reference to moistness, as in the lush, verdant garden where God planted the first man and woman. The contrast is between Sarah’s shriveledness and Eden’s freshness. Pleasure here has more than one implication. It’s not just the pleasure of physical feeling (nothing wrong with that though), it’s the pleasure of Abraham wanting to be with Sarah in that way they can hardly remember. And it’s the pleasure of her having a boy, a child of her own, after a lifetime of feeling cursed in the eyes of a world that only valued women for their childbearing.

We laugh at things when we see the incongruity of things, the starkness of reality and how far it is from the way it should be. We laugh to keep from crying.

In our midweek video devotional this week, Carrie Prysock, who for her day job runs the mayor and city council office of Dallas, mentioned reading George Eliot’s Middlemarch. “What we call our despair,” she wrote, “is often only the painful eagerness of unfed hope.”

I love that. This is what we see here with Sarah. Her laughter is a product of an unfed hope that
things could be different. When the word of God comes to her, it opens up her world and then her womb. What seems impossible may be possible after all. But before she lets herself believe it, she laughs at the sheer thought of it.

The Lord asks Abraham why Sarah laughed. Sarah comes out from hiding to insist she didn't laugh. The Lord says, *Yes, you did laugh.* Denial keeps us stuck; truth sets us free.

Surprisingly, the laughter of disbelief doesn't disqualify the couple from God’s promise. Sometimes that first laughter at what seems closed, like her womb, like the future, is what opens us to new possibilities.

Sixty-nine years ago this week, 39 members of Lakewood Baptist Church were “churched.” That’s an old Baptist word for excommunicated. They dared to challenge the pastor about some of his leadership moves. They were handed their church membership cards and ushered out of the church meeting. They had been cut off. Will we ever have pleasure again? they must have asked themselves. Will our faith have children? They met the next night, June 14, 1951, and others joined them. Fifty-five of them started Wilshire Baptist Church from nothing. Lakewood Church no longer exists. Wilshire does.

The past two weeks of protests in Dallas and around the country have brought to a head the painful frustration of black Americans. From slavery to Jim Crow segregation to desegregation that never led to integration, it’s been one thing after another. I won’t recount the whole history for you here. You know it or should. But how black people have held up and not given up through it all is a testament to fortitude.

White supremacists made a strategic mistake long ago by introducing black slaves to Christianity. The white churches of the South did everything they could to instill in black Americans the idea that they were created inferior and had a God-ordained role to serve their white superiors. They gave them the Slave Bible. Only four copies remain. It cut out the Book of Exodus and all references to freedom and liberation of slaves. It left all those parts about law and order, about slaves obeying their masters.
God would have the last laugh. Those slaves got the true gospel white people missed because they were busy trying to control other people for their own profit. The gospel that everybody belongs! Every Body. Black and brown bodies as well as white ones. They also caught the truth that the gospel was not only about going to God when you die but also about God coming to you where you live. Not about leaving earth for heaven, but about heaven coming to earth. It’s about God exchanging pain for pleasure, despair for hope and death for life. Just as God does for Abraham and Sarah.

Right now, we have a lot of white nervousness over what is taking place in the streets. We are worried that the way we have organized things to our benefit will be lost. We want law and order because we can’t imagine a new and better order of law. We never seem to learn. God is the one who orders the world according to God’s gracious will. And God will disturb the peace in order to bring true peace that only comes with genuine justice.

George Floyd’s memorial service in Houston this week lasted four hours. What was remarkable was how one speaker after another punctuated the power of love. No words of vengeance or retribution. The one white preacher invited was our friend, Steve Wells, from our sister church, South Main Baptist. Steve quoted 1 John about how you are liar if you say you love God and hate your brother or sister. “Racism,” he said, “is the reversal of the revelation of God. Racism is not perfect love casting out fear, it is perfect fear casting out love.”

It’s time for the church of Jesus Christ to align with God’s way. God has made a promise to black Americans of freedom and a future. Churches like ours are either going to be with them—in which case we will share that freedom and future with them, or we will go out of business as surely as that Lakewood church that thought exclusion and expulsion were the way to life.

It’s a failure of imagination, like unto Abraham and Sarah’s initial laughter, to start with where things are and say they’ve always been this way and nothing unexpected can happen to bring a new world. Wilshire, we know something about this. Consider the joy we know today because we allowed God to open our imagination to the possible
by opening ourselves to people who formerly were not able to be their full selves among us. Opening up in love to our LGBTQ siblings has produced a new and surprising future for us together. We have found the laughter of astonishment over a new world that was born of a promise.

After laughing at the absurdity, Abraham and Sarah try love. They meet in the tent. Sarah opens herself up in hope. And unto them a child is born. Unto them a son is given.

Isaac's name means—laughter. Son of laughter. Every day for the rest of her life when she looked at her boy or called his name, she had to laugh—this time out of astonishment at what God had conceived in her and for her. Instead of laughing at her, people would laugh with her.

See, with God all things really are possible. In the end all true laughter is holy laughter. Because God always gets the last laugh. Amen.