

Women & Angels of the Bible: Sarah Laughs with the Angels

Forward Movement Managing Editor Richelle Thompson recently chatted with Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the popular book [Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter](#), and Kate Moorehead, author of [Angels of the Bible: Finding Grace, Beauty, and Meaning](#).

You can also listen to this conversation in a special episode of [the Forward Day by Day podcast](#), released on May 7, 2020.

Richelle: Welcome to this conversation with two of our favorite forward movement authors, Kate Morehead, author of *Angels of the Bible: Finding Grace, Beauty, and Meaning*, and Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the bestselling *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*. Welcome, Kate, Lindsay. Thanks for being here today to talk about the role of women and the role of angels in the Bible.

Richelle: Before we get started, we just wanted to acknowledge the uncertainty and anxiety in the world today and want to let everyone know that we at Forward Movement and in Florida and in Minnesota are praying for you and thinking about you. We at Forward Movement gather each morning at 10 a.m.—and now virtually—to pray for you and the needs of the world. May God's strength be with all of us during these days.

Richelle: Now let us turn to Sarah. Sarah was also in the midst of pretty uncertain times. God promises that she would have a child. And here she is, age ninety-five, and no child. So, Lindsay, set the stage for us. Tell us who Sarah is and what's going on in her life.

Lindsay: This is a great story. And you're right, Richelle, it does reflect some of the anxiety-filled times that we live in today because Sarah has been out in the wilderness with her husband Abraham for going on twenty-five years. Her greatest goal—and the goal of many women in that time—was just to bear a child. If you didn't have your own child with your husband, it was like the wind blowing in the desert, the sands away; your life didn't count for very much. Abraham, as you remember, had been told that he would have as many descendants as there were stars in the sky. And to that end, Sarah had helped Abraham have a child because she was the woman of the covenant; she was trying to make God's plan come to fruition. So she had

arranged for him to have a child with her maid servant Hagar. That had not worked out well for Sarah. The child's name was Ishmael, and Sarah drove Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness.

Lindsay: So now, some twenty-five years later, Abraham is 100 and Sarah is 90, and God has just told Abraham in the preceding chapter that we're looking at today, in Genesis 17, that Sarah will bear a child, and Abraham's reaction is to laugh. Oh, are you kidding? My wife is so old, basically is what he says. So that chapter ends. And then we open up in chapter eighteen by the oaks of Mamre. In the desert near Hebron, three mysterious figures come up—they almost rise up out of the desert sand. And in those days, the desert law was that you reached out to your neighbor, you reached out the desert to others that might be coming your way. You practiced the law of hospitality. You took them in. You gave them food. You ministered to them.

Lindsay: So Sarah is infertile, still very upset that she has not been able to bear a child. It's her greatest desire. These three beings—they look like men—come out of the desert. Abraham greets them and immediately gives them something to eat and says to Sarah, "Go. Go fix these visitors a wonderful meal." So she does. And he has his servant kill the fatted calf, and a wonderful meal is prepared. Then all of a sudden, one of the three beings speaks to Abraham and says, "You know, a year from now, your wife Sarah will bear a child." Sarah hears this conversation going on from behind the tent wall where she is preparing the food. And she starts to laugh.

Lindsay: To me, this is one of the greatest moments in the whole Hebrew Bible. She starts to laugh. And she says, "No, can't be possible. Can an old woman like me really have a great moment of pleasure with her husband?" So she's laughing. Now let me just stop right there because we're at this great moment in the Bible, and it turns out that one of the men is actually the Lord. I should stop right there, Richelle. In that dramatic, passionate moment where Sarah is laughing and where she's saying, "It can't be possible that after I have grown old and my husband is old, shall I still have pleasure?" Wow, that's a really human moment. But let me stop there in case you or Kate have anything to add.

Richelle: Yes, Kate, tell us. I mean, there are these beings that emerge from the desert. Are they angels? What are these beings?

Kate: Well, the Hebrew is so wonderful. It's ambiguous.

Richelle: As Hebrew so often is.

Kate: Yes! In this case, there's this broad, broad, big word that means so much. They were called messengers. And the concept was that an angel could be a person or a celestial being, and ultimately, it didn't matter as long as it got the message. It was the message that was important. Now, it's amazing to me to think about the cultural difference between Abraham and Sarah's mentality in the desert and ours during this quarantine. They were actually the antithesis of one another because back then, there were so few people that if a stranger approached you in the desert, you were to treat them as God himself or herself—often people traveling would be men, though.

Kate: So there was this notion that anyone who came near your tent could be an angel or could be even the Lord himself. So, that's profound. Right now, we're assuming that everybody is infected. So it's almost the opposite. When we see a stranger, we're supposed to stay six feet away and not speak. Definitely not touch.

Kate: Abraham rushes out of the tent. It's high noon, and it's very, very hot, dangerously hot. And yet he rushes out from the shade into the heat and falls down at the feet of these three, not knowing who they are, and offers them the best of his food when there was very little food to go around. So the concept is: Someone you meet could be God. You're supposed to not only welcome them, but embrace them, fall down at their feet, and give them the best of what you have.

Richelle: So today it would be yeast and toilet paper and hand sanitizer?

Kate: Right! So now we can't touch one another, but we could still encounter this notion of radical hospitality. Let's say we meet someone online. What if we have something to learn from them? What if they possess a message that could be from God that we need to open our hearts for the stranger in that capacity? I think we can still do that even with the physical limitations of the virus that prevent us from hugging and sloppy kissing and all that. So I think that we

shouldn't shut down the possibility that the people we don't know might have the wisdom that we need to hear.

Kate: The fact that there are three beings is often assumed as one of the first trinitarian reflections in the Hebrew scriptures: Could God be a plurality as well as a unity? Abraham addresses them as "The Lord" in singular. And yet, there are clearly three of them, so that brings up the whole concept of the ministry of God's nature. There's a lot of rich material there. And I love what Lindsey said. I mean, who else laughs in the face of an angel? Sarah's just got so much gumption. She's funny. She's demanding. She's quite a personality. And when the angel says you're going to have a child, she laughs. She's way past menopause. And then she's also questioning, "You mean, I'm going to have sex with my husband? You mean, I'm going to have pleasure? Like I'm going to enjoy this?" She's laughing at all the facets of getting pregnant: at the interaction with her husband, which obviously has dried up, and then, in her body. Her body is wrinkled and old, and it's not menstruating. And, you know, she's absolutely right. It is a ridiculous thought. But then again, God can do the ridiculous. The miraculous.

Lindsay: That's what I like about looking at why Sarah laughed. Abraham gets mad at Sarah. And God says, "Why did your wife laugh?" And then God says, well, "Is anything too hard for me?"

Lindsay: All of a sudden, Abraham is talking to the Lord, which he does throughout his interactions with God, and Sarah all of a sudden realizes that she's laughing in the face of the Lord. And she says, "I didn't laugh. I didn't laugh." That is what I like about her. She's a very real, real personality. And there's that great sense of joy and denial and wonder. God says, "Is anything too hard for me?", which I guess is also another lesson of living in this time.

Kate: The fact is: We know we can get viruses from other people, but we forget there's a lot of things that are contagious. Joy is contagious. The Holy Spirit is contagious. We can still get a lot of good stuff from each other, too. And the presence of God happens most potently when two or three are gathered together. So even though we can't be physically together, we should not let that make us isolated. We should remember that we can still pass on great stuff to each other, even if it's over a Zoom phone call.

Richelle: Or a podcast with remarkable women!

Lindsay: The fact is that God finds Abraham and Sarah, and she does conceive. She bears Isaac, the heir to the promise, the child of the covenant. She bears him within a year, as the angels have said, as the Lord has said. When she feels herself pregnant, never having been pregnant at age 90, as you point out, Kate, you picture this old, stumped-over woman who's still got a great personality, but her body has seen better days, stronger days, more youthful days, more fertile days, and then to get pregnant...think about her joy there in the desert and her great pride in her son Isaac and all this coming to fruition.

Lindsay: It came to fruition because they followed The Way. They did what God it asked them to do. They threw themselves out there in the desert under the stars. They were affluent family. We know that they had servants in tents and caravans and camels, etc., etc. But there they were, out in the wilderness, and it is like today, isn't it? We are out in the wilderness, out in exile. We have been thrown into isolation, whether we want to or not, fragmented and not sure how things will come together again. But I guess our challenge is to believe and know that they will.

Kate: Well, I think the word quarantine comes from the number 40 and the 40 days in the desert. And we are definitely in another exodus of sorts. We are in a desert period in which we are being called by God to encounter the stranger, to encounter new ideas, to encounter God because we've been stripped of our comfort. So exodus and desert periods are always times of rich fertility in the spiritual life. Although our physical lives are limited, our spiritual lives, I think, are awakening greatly in this time. You can see that by people tuning in online to worship in numbers they haven't before.

Lindsay: Although I'm sure that that's true, but the other part of this is just the dry, dry desert. I mean, we'll probably look back at this time and be able to see those parts of our spiritual lives that have grown. But on the other hand, it's a dry place.

Kate: Right. But I think it's a place of reinventing because in the desert was when the covenant was born. And, you know, Jesus went out in the desert before recognizing his full ministry. So it's absolutely dry, but there's good stuff going on there in that dry, barren place.

Richelle: I hear both of what you're saying. And I think sometimes listeners or other people might laugh when they hear: "Great things are going to come from this." So that's what's so interesting to me about this story and especially hearing it right now. I can imagine myself laughing. That seems ridiculous. What are all the great things that might come from a pandemic or from being in my 90s and not having a child? That's laughable. I like the idea, though, that a sense of humor is very human.

Kate: Yeah, yeah, it's funny. You know, the Renaissance happened after the Black Plague. New Orleans Jazz emerged after a horrible epidemic in New Orleans. Shakespeare right after great plagues in Britain. There is a sense that after a terrible period of suffering, often these flowers bloom, and new ideas are birthed. Like Lindsay said, it's a terrible period that we're going through. But there's often so much rebirth that happens as a result. Maybe it's almost like a fire burning through the forest, and then there's all this new growth. Definitely, our descendants were created from this dry period, from this laughing, unbelieving old lady.

Lindsay: That's what I like about Sarah. You know, it's not just a little girlish giggle. It's a sarcastic laugh—and a little cynical. Like, "Are you kidding me?"

Richelle: And we have Isaac, who becomes a major figure in the Bible and is a part of our heritage as Christians today.

Kate: In a way, we're all born from the desert.

Richelle: So, Kate, you and Lindsay have both touched on the idea of hospitality. This story is often seen as a model for hospitality. What lessons do you think it offers to us outside of a pandemic? And also within it?

Kate: Well, it's interesting. So much of the past of Christianity has been about us going and being missionaries, where we would go to a foreign land and try to tell them how to do things the way we do. This is almost the opposite notion. A stranger approaches you, and you invite them to a meal, and you listen to them. I mean, this gift came because Abraham was listening. Sarah was listening. She was listening at the flap of the tent. She was very curious. And so the

notion is that people who are strangers or foreign or different may not need us to tell them how to live; It may be the flip opposite. We may have a lot to learn from them. If we can open our minds to that concept, then we can really hear from God. Whereas if we approach people with the arrogance that maybe they need more money or they need to be fed, or they need this, or they need that, then we don't hear the fullness of God's message to us because we're assuming we don't have anything to hear. So I think hospitality is about welcoming, but it's also about listening and learning.

Richelle: Lindsay, what are your thoughts?

Lindsay: I'm thinking of that line in Hebrews, where it is pointed out what you're saying, Kate, about entertaining: Don't be scared to entertain angels and encounter the presence of God. In this time of isolation, what strikes me is that God will find us as he found Thomas. Thomas wasn't first in the Upper Room with the other disciples when Jesus came back and talked to the disciples behind closed doors on that first night of the resurrection. But Jesus went out of his way to come back when Thomas was present.

Lindsay: Jesus will find us in the desert. God will find us in the desert. The Spirit will find us in the desert. And it may be in the shape of angels. It seems to me that in this time of isolation, it's hard to be found, because many of us are in our caves, especially those of us who have been told to stay home. But God will find us even there.

A lot of people are out on the front lines. I sincerely hope God is finding those people as well. And God may be revealing himself or herself to them through the patients that they are taking care of. It's a time when we all are being found or have the potential to be found by God, even when we're not looking for it. Right before this chapter, it strikes me that God told Abraham the same thing: Sarah will have a child in a year.

Lindsay: Obviously we have different writers of the Hebrew Bible weaving through these stories. But it strikes me that God had to bring Sarah into the plan. It wasn't just something where Abraham was gonna go home and say, "Hey, you're going to have a baby in a year. I ran into God, and God told me this." God had to bring Sarah into the plan as well. So that a reassuring thought—that our faith is not just something told to us by other people, but we must experience it for ourselves.

Richelle: What would have happened if Abraham and Sarah hadn't welcomed the strangers?

Kate: That's a mystery to us, but it could be that the promise wouldn't be fulfilled. There was something about that encounter that was fundamentally important. They were almost answering or giving God an opportunity when they opened their hospitality to these strangers.

Richelle: It makes me think of other conversations that we have had about Mary opening herself up to saying yes and Mary Magdalene, who opened herself up to being at the tomb and to the stranger who she thought was the stranger and called him the gardener. And it was Jesus. There's this idea of putting ourselves out there, taking a risk, and opening ourselves up. I mean, Abraham and Sarah, on the one hand, took a risk to feed these strangers. They didn't know what might happen in the desert.

Lindsay: Well, they had lived a life of risk and uncertainty for twenty-five years at this point. They had put themselves out there day after day, year after year, decade after decade, putting themselves out there, following what they believed to be God's call, following the path that they believed God would lead them. They didn't know where they were going. They didn't know what their promised land was going to look like. But they believed. And I think that's the whole promise of the Easter season and beyond. If we have some faith to start with, then God will increase that faith.

Richelle: Jesus talks about the faith of a mustard seed. I've seen people talk about how the coronavirus is .125 microns thick. Compare that to a piece of hair, which is seventy-five microns. It just makes me think that if something that small can change the world the way that it has, what can a mustard seed of faith do?

Kate: That's wonderful. A wonderful analogy.

Richelle: What other lessons do you see or that you want to share from Sarah's story today?

Kate: Well, I just imagine also her joy, after the laughter, when the pregnancy occurs. Imagine an old woman, shriveled up, her breasts becoming full of milk again, her whole body becoming

round again, gaining all this weight, no doubt. What a joy that must have been for her, especially when she had never experienced it and waited her whole life for it. I just love to think deeply about how God ended up answering that prayer of hers that she asked for so long. And it shows us that sometimes we ask and we don't hear and we think nothing's happening. But it just takes a while sometimes. And in a way, because it took so long, I imagine her joy was so full. She wasn't fifteen. She understood the miracle of what was happening to her in a way that a younger person might take for granted. So she was able to experience the fullness of the answer with greater depth because of the fact that she had to wait so long. Here we are waiting around a lot. So I'm hoping there's going to be value in that.

Richelle: I imagine that first hug with my mom or my dad and resting into them and leaning into them and smelling them and touching them. You know, that moment will mean a lot more than the hugs that I've had.

Kate: That's very true. It's the waiting sometimes that creates the value and the depth of appreciation for something. And we're a fast-food oriented, and we don't like to wait. But the waiting, oh, it makes things richer.

Lindsay: You know, what I like about this story is thinking of the encounters that Jesus had with women in the New Testament. There was the woman at the well who was so sarcastic and beaten down, cynical. The woman who'd been married five times who was living with a man, but it wasn't her husband. And Jesus was able to speak to her clearly, and she saw him as the Messiah. She was very cynical and very tired, and I imagine that she was in some ways like Sarah. And it is these women who are rising to the surface in the Bible. It's the old ones. It's the tired ones. It's the careworn ones. It's the skeptical ones and in some ways, the bitter ones. These days, when we're experiencing Covid-19 and all the ramifications, sometimes it's easy to fall into those places where we're feel despairing, where we feel depressed, we feel tired, and we feel careworn. And yet those are the experiences, human experiences where God finds us. And that's a pretty nice thought that gives me joy.

Kate: Amen.

Richelle: I thought we'd end with a prayer. Let us pray.

Richelle: For faith in uncertain times. Almighty God, who at creation put into motion an unpredictable rhythm of advance and decline, grant us faith in uncertain times. For the sick and dying awakening in new places, medical aid workers making new homes away from loved ones, unemployed workers scrambling to find new ways to get by, and all who are feeling the stress and burden of not knowing, energize our faith. Help us feel your presence, and fill us with confidence to face what can't be ascertained or changed. This we ask of the one who is our rock and fortress. Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Richelle: This prayer was written by Chris Yaw, a beautiful prayer for uncertain times. Thank you both, Kate, Lindsay, for your time and for the joy of being in your company and hearing your wisdom about women and the angels. Especially at this time when it does feel lonely, it is good to be with you.