

WHY AREN'T YOU LAUGHING?

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Genesis 18:1-15

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“Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else.”¹

It had nearly destroyed their marriage, this promise from God. It had been with them for years, sometimes like a butterfly leading them into a hopeful tomorrow, but most of the time like a dead weight dragging them down into the dusty earth. Sometimes, one or the other of them wanted to hold onto it, and at other times, one or the other of them was ready to give up on the whole thing. It's not that they weren't faithful. They were. They were ready to do whatever God called them to do. For goodness sakes, they were the ones who left their homes and families and went, trusting that God would show them the way. They had been through a lot, and God had been faithful.

Except in this one thing. It was hard to understand. They had tried to work it out themselves with Hagar, and wound up with Ishmael. And Sarah knew it had been her idea. But she immediately regretted it. She didn't think through what it would be like. She didn't know how she would feel about Hagar after that—or how Hagar would feel about her. And she hadn't thought about how she was locking herself out of the promise that way. He was Abraham's son, but not hers. And it started to eat away at her, and at them. When she thought about it, the jealousy was too much. The promise was technically fulfilled for Abraham, but not for her. She became bitter.

There were so many late night conversations, so many tears, so many angry words, so much silence. And then finally resignation. It had been decades. It wasn't going to happen. And at this point, did Sarah even want it to happen anyway? She had made her peace with it, she had found a way to live happily with Abraham again. But then, out of nowhere, all the talk about a son begins again.

Abraham was sitting under a tree. Perhaps he was contemplating the conversation he had just had with God, in which God again promised that Sarah would have a son. Abraham laughed himself because he was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. And maybe he didn't dare bring it up to Sarah because he knew where they had been, and how long it took to get there. He relished the peace they had found.

But as he sat under the oak tree, he saw some visitors approaching, and he suspected something was about to happen. He must have realized these visitors were out of the ordinary, because he didn't even blink when they asked about his wife, Sarah, by name.

Sarah listened to everything. She'd been asked to put on a big spread at the drop of hat—which wasn't entirely out of the ordinary in a culture that valued hospitality—but still, it seemed like a lot for just three men who were passing through. So she wanted to know just what was going on, and she eavesdropped on their conversation. The conversation was meant for her, anyway. God had already told Abraham all this—that Sarah was going to have a son. These words were for her.

And when she heard them, Sarah laughed. Because after all the years. And all the mistakes, and all the sadness, and all the anger, and all the silence, and finally the resignation. Now? Now that she was so old? This was the time when God was going to fulfill the promise? So she laughed. The laugh of a cynic, maybe. Or maybe the laugh of relief? Or disbelief? There are a lot of reasons we laugh.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 158.

And one of the visitors, who is finally identified as the Lord, asked, “Why did Sarah laugh? ...Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” And Sarah feels caught, I suppose—though I don’t think the question was designed to catch her as much as it was designed to get her to reflect. But she feels caught all the same, and she denies laughing, but the Lord does not let her retract her laughter. Her laughter is so important, in fact, that when God’s promise is fulfilled, her laughter is celebrated in the name of her son, Isaac, which means “laughter.”

My youngest daughter doesn’t quite get how jokes work. But that doesn’t keep her from telling them. Especially knock-knock jokes. She knows the format, but she doesn’t get how they are designed to capitalize on a particular word, or surprise, or something. Her knock-knock jokes usually go something like this: “Knock-knock. Who’s there? Chicken. Chicken who? Chicken watermelon.” They don’t make any sense. They seem to be pointless. We still laugh, though, and her jokes do capture one thing about humor which is incongruity. One thing that makes us laugh is when statements and situations are incongruous, when they don’t make sense, when they challenge our assumptions.

For that reason, humor and faith are closely related. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr has described an intimate relationship between humor and faith.² Laughter recognizes the absurdity of something, the incongruity of life. But, he says, we cannot stay at the point of laughter, we have to move from humor to faith. Faith is recognizing the incongruity and diving right into it headfirst, living in it, looking to God as our source of meaning. Laughter that doesn’t turn to faith will likely yield bitterness. We cannot stay at the point of laughter; laughing at the absurdity and incongruity of the world without finding ultimate meaning in God can only breed cynicism. We have to make the move from laughter to faith. But laughter is still a good place to start.

So, this is why I don’t really think God is challenging the laughter, even though Sarah seems to take it that way. Abraham himself laughed at the idea in the chapter previous, without any challenge from God. I think the “why” question is a genuine invitation to Sarah to reflect on the laughter. Why? Why laugh? What is it about this that strikes you as funny? And the important question is the next one that moves from laughter to faith: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

So I think a better question for you and for me might be, why aren’t we laughing? Do we not recognize the absurdity and the incongruity of all of this, of what God can do and what God might ask us to do? Does our faith not expect enough weird stuff? Or do we expect the Gospel to fit in with the rest of the constructs of our lives. Do we expect the Gospel to also make good business and financial sense? Do we expect the Gospel to also make us look like reasonable people to our peers? Do we expect the Gospel to keep us safe and secure? Do we expect the Gospel to line up perfectly with our preferred political sensibilities? Do we expect the Gospel to bring us into contact with people we are comfortable dealing with? Do we expect the Gospel to disrupt our lives at all? Why aren’t we laughing?

Because the truth is, so much of what the Gospel is about is laughable.

The Gospel text today from the lectionary is from the Gospel of Matthew—we didn’t read it, of course, but it tells of the calling of the twelve disciples. And had we read it, it would have stood as a good reminder of the kinds of people God calls. We see it throughout scripture. Over and over again, God chooses the unlikely candidate to fulfill God’s purposes. An elderly mother like Sarah is among those that seem pretty unexpected. It’s laughable, really.

Not to mention the exceedingly high expectations God then has of us. Here’s the mission those first disciples in Matthew are sent out with: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”

² See Reinhold Niebuhr’s sermon, “Humor and Faith” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, pp. 112-131

Laughable. You don't see that in a lot of church mission statements. Most churches just say something like "share the Good News" and then struggle with that. God's original call to Abraham and Sarah was just to go, to leave everything, and to trust that God would show them the way. God sure does expect a lot. It's laughable.

And then there's the sense of time. Our time and God's time just don't always match up, particularly as we get more and more used to the instantaneous. Abraham and Sarah wait their entire lives to see a promise fulfilled by God. This kind of waiting does not suit our cultural expectations. It's laughable.

The Gospel is not the kind of thing that fits in comfortably with the way we are already living. The message of the Gospel is laughable because if understood rightly, it can turn our whole lives upside down.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise if we find ourselves laughing. We ought to laugh. It's a step toward faith. But it's the next question we need to ask—after we ask why we're laughing or why we aren't laughing—the next question is really the most important—"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

This is the really dangerous question. This question asks us whether we really believe anything will happen. It asks us whether we think anything can ever really change—can situations ever really change, can churches ever change, can people ever really change? Part of what is behind the question is whether we really want things to change? Some of us have become quite at home in our problems. Some of us don't want things to change because we are the problem. And some of us just don't see a way. Can God actually do anything? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? That is the real question of this story.

I remember sitting in a Sunday school class one time—not here, in another church—and somehow the conversation turned to how we deal with difficult people in our families and in our professional life. And someone said, "People don't change. Once you learn that that's the way they are, you just know what to expect." There was enthusiastic agreement with that statement from the rest of the class. And I thought how sad that was—is that really what we expect, is that really what the church is teaching—that people can't change? Is that the truth of the Gospel? That transformation is not possible?

If we open ourselves up to the idea that there is nothing too wonderful for our God, we might find that we are filled with a little nervous laughter. Because who knows exactly what that might mean? What kind of transformation might that mean for us, for ourselves, for those around us, for our church, for our community? Will we like it? And how will we be called to participate in it? Will it mean we have to do something really weird, like be the 90-year-old mother to an infant? I doubt it will be that exact calling, but it might be something that seems equally strange to you.

If we believe that nothing is too wonderful for our God, we might just find that our lives our changed—that we are the ones who are changed.

Why aren't you laughing?

Amen.