God’s Joke

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We take God seriously, but there is an inherent risk in taking ourselves too seriously.

What makes us laugh? The answer to this question is not as simple as it sounds. Laughter cannot be produced in a laboratory. We don’t laugh on command. We laugh unconsciously.

Laughing is universal to the human experience. All people laugh, some more than others. Children laugh on average 400 times daily, adults not so much—on average about 17 times each day.

People say laughter is the best medicine. There is considerable truth to this saying. Laughter lowers blood pressure, reduces heart disease and stabilizes the body’s immune system. Laughter serves as a harmless way to dispense of harmless emotions and reduce stress. It triggers the release of endorphins, the body’s feel-good chemical.

Laughing provides a total body workout. This explains why we feel exhausted after a bout with laughter. Laughing 100 times each day is equivalent to 15 minutes on the exercise bike.

The Christian church historically has regarded laughter with a certain degree of wariness. After all, the search for meaning is serious business. Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th century spoke of laughter as an enemy of the soul. Humor can be deadly, especially when it reinforces prejudices and denigrates people. But there is also a danger in being deadly serious all the time. We take God seriously, but there is an inherent risk in taking ourselves too seriously.

Humor relies on the unexpected. Incongruity and surprise are essential to good comedy. Something strikes us as funny when we expect one outcome and another occurs.

Humor figures prominently in the story of Abraham. Sarah laughs involuntarily in our lesson, in much the same way Abraham laughs out loud in the previous chapter. More about their laughter in a moment, but first, the story.

Our story opens with Abraham sitting by the entrance of his tent. He has finished his morning routine and is enjoying his midday siesta during the heat of the day. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees three strangers approaching. He recognizes them to be travelers of some sort. In Bedouin culture, hospitality is regarded as a sacred duty. It would have been rude for Abraham to deny
food, water and shelter to his honored guests. To refuse them hospitality would be considered a hostile act.

Abraham springs into action and brings water to wash their feet. He calls upon Sarah to bake homemade bread. He plans a sumptuous meal for his three guests and assumes the posture of a servant. When it comes time for them to leave, he starts them on their journey.

The identity of these three travelers isn’t known to Abraham at the outset of this story. As readers, we’re told from the start that “the Lord appeared to Abraham” (18:1) but Abraham knows nothing. The author of Hebrews surely has this story in mind when he writes, “Do not neglect to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2).

They ask Abraham, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” (18:9). Abraham answers that she can be found in the adjoining tent. Then one of them adds the comment, “I’m coming back about this time next year; when I arrive, your wife Sarah will have a son” (18:10). Maybe it’s beginning to register with Abraham that these three strangers are not mere travelers after all.

Sarah happens to be eavesdropping in the next tent. The narrator reminds us at this point in the story that Abraham and Sarah are in their golden years. Abraham is pushing the century mark and Sarah is only ten years his junior. In verse 11, we read that “it has ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women” (18:11). It’s a polite way of saying that Sarah has been post-menopausal for some time now.

The promise that she will bear a son strikes Sarah as, well, funny. It’s not a defiant laugh. She doesn’t fall down laughing like Abraham does in the previous chapter (17:17). She laughs to herself at the incongruity of having a son at her advanced age. Maybe she’s laughing because she stopped crying long ago. Perhaps she is thinking to herself, “Men just don’t get it. Don’t they know I’m not menstruating anymore?”

One of the three, identified as the Lord in verse 13, asks Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say ‘Shall I have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (18:13-14). The Hebrew word translated “hard” can also refer to something wonderful or extraordinary, so the verse can also be translated, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” This time next year, God will accomplish something wonderful in Sarah’s life. She will bear a son (18:14).

By now Sarah is feeling defensive, so she hollers out from the next tent, “I did not laugh.” I love this verbal

When it comes time for their son to be born, his parents name him Isaac. God chose this name for their son in chapter 17: “Your wife, Sarah, will bear you a son and you shall name him Isaac” (17:19). Isaac (Yitzak in the Hebrew) translates “he laughs.” Abraham laughs; Sarah does, too, so we might as well go all the way and call him laughter. Every time they call their son’s name, they will be reminded of their disbelieving laughter. I don’t suppose God’s upset with Sarah for her involuntary laugh. God’s upset has to do with the reason behind the laughter. They doubt the promise. Sarah’s words when her son is finally born, in chapter 21, turns out to be a play on words on Isaac’s name, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me” (21:6). Joy is the best kind of laughter.

By the end of the story, everybody is laughing. I suspect even God is laughing. You might say God will have the last laugh on this one.

I have a new appreciation for the story of Abraham. I was acquainted with God’s promise of a son to Abraham in Genesis 12 and Isaac’s birth in Genesis 21. Yet, somehow, I had skipped over his 25 years of struggle related to this promise. Struggle is a central feature in Abraham’s story. He learns how to believe by trial and error. Struggle is the incubator where trust is born.

The Biblical writers don’t whitewash the lives of our heroes. It would have been tempting to rewrite history and airbrush less flattering aspects from Abraham’s life. Remember, Abraham lies about Sarah’s identity, passing her off as his sister. Then there is this little matter of Abraham’s reproductive misadventures with Hagar. They both laugh at the incongruity of a son.

Abraham and Sarah are not paragons of virtue. They are not larger-than-life saints. The ancient proverb comes to mind: “God draws straight lines with a crooked stick.” They laugh at God’s promises. But God does some of his best work among the most unlikely people. God doesn’t require good people in order to do good work.

God almost seems to go out of His way to create an impossible situation. He waits until Abraham and Sarah are beyond child-bearing years before their child of promise is born. This is deliberate on God’s part to prove that nothing is too hard for the Lord.

The question God asks, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” is critical to our passage. Some might regard it as a
rhetorical question which begs a negative response. No, of course not! Nothing is too hard for the Lord. I wouldn’t be so sure. Maybe you are facing an impossible situation right now and the answer to this question isn’t so obvious. You may be living in a loveless marriage or trying to cope with fractured family relationships or tiptoeing around an impossible boss at work. Some situations are so deep and complex, there seems to be no way out. We wouldn’t actually come out and say so, but cynicism has taken hold. If we are honest with ourselves, we would say, yes, there are some situations so hopelessly hard that even God can’t remedy them. Our notion of God is so small.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Let this question hang in the air for a moment. The New Testament tells us of another improbable birth. It doesn’t involve an old, infertile couple this time around, but a young virgin named Mary. What the angel says is instructive for us, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

Jesus reinforces this point time and again in his earthly ministry. When he encounters a seemingly hopeless situation he tells his followers, “For God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27). “Nothing will be impossible for you (Matthew 17:20).

I’ve heard people talk about such verses with an air of breezy triumphalism. Everything is possible, we tell children. You can have it all. The sky is the limit. You can do anything you set your mind to do. Blah-blah-blah!

Everything isn’t always possible. I can’t walk through walls or be two places at once. Some things aren’t possible. Only what corresponds to God’s good purposes is possible.

When Jesus faces the prospect of his death on the cross, he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). It is possible for God to remove the cup, but it doesn’t happen. Only those things that align with God’s good purposes are indeed possible.

Put this question to the test this week: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” Check your cynicism at the door. Ask God to do what you have written off as impossible.