

June 18, 2023

Romans 5:1-8

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

Laughing With God

In honor of Father's Day, I'd like to share a few Dad Jokes with you.

How do you make an octopus laugh? With Ten-tickles. What did one

hat say to the other hat? You stay here. I'll go on a head. What happens

when you park a frog illegally? It gets toad. Ha Ha. Yes, I know. They

are terrible. And they are funny. Please share them as you see fit today.

Jokes are fun. And there is a time and place for them. There is even a

time and place for them in our scripture today. In our reading from

Genesis, Sarah is laughing at a joke. It's a real knee-slapper. She has just

heard it from a stranger they are hosting for dinner, who has suggested—

get this!-- that SHE will have a baby. Ha! Her? Pregnant? At 89 years

old? Are you kidding me? That ship has sailed. There are no babies

happening here. Sarah cannot help it. She laughs right out loud.

Once Sarah believed that God had promised her such a thing. That she,

Sarah, even though she was advanced in years, would have a baby. It

was part of a covenant God made with her and Abraham. And they got

excited. And they waited and they waited. And life kept going and the

years kept moving on. And Sarah knew that it couldn't happen now. It was much too late. If only the stranger knew how painful his comment was.

Sarah had been waiting for a child. God had promised it to them. God had made a covenant, a solemn vow, that from them would come a great nation. That they would have descendants like the stars in a land of their own. They would be blessed, and all the families of the earth would be blessed too. Sarah and Abraham believed God's promises. And for that promise, they left Haran and they moved to Canaan. Then a great famine took them from Canaan to Egypt. And then from Egypt, they went back to Canaan and settled at Hebron. That entire journey, since the beginning had taken fifteen years, and still, they were waiting for their promise.

Who knew a promise could take this long?

Sometimes, a promise can take a while. Sometimes the promises of God seem to get hung up and delayed. They can fade over time and distance.

And we can begin to wonder if they were ever true to begin with. We wonder if God cares about us. If God really does want to bless us.

Imagine waiting, like Abraham and Sarah, having staked everything to a

far-fetched idea, to a hope and a promise and then, realizing that it has taken so long that your body can no longer handle it. It is no longer physically possible. Imagine wondering why God promised such a thing in the first place.

Sarah found all of this frustrating. She found it aggravating. Like those of us who hate to wait, she took matters into her own hands. She told Abraham to have a baby with her slave, Hagar. And soon the cute little nugget of a baby Ishmael arrived. It looked like their problem was solved. Way to go, Sarah! But her solution made matters worse. Her impatience created resentment and jealousy and division between Abraham and Sarah, and her slave Hagar and her child Ishmael. God's promise was specific. Abraham and Sarah would have a child. They would be the father and mother of a new nation. This is what God planned to do, because it was something that couldn't be done without God.

In our scripture reading today, we find Abraham and Sarah settled in Hebron at the oaks of Mamre. And it is just another day of despondent waiting. Abraham looks up from where he is seated at his tent, and he

sees three strangers. Abraham senses there is something important about these strangers, something curious and worth investigating. He jumps up and runs over and invites them to come and take a break with him from the heat of the day. But this isn't just a water break. Abraham rolls out the red carpet. He has his servants wash their feet and make them comfortable. He tells Sarah to bake fresh bread. He has his best calf butchered and prepared. He puts together a feast for these strangers, waiting on them. Because hospitality was no joke in his culture. It was a matter of honor and respect. And that's still true in that region of the world. When the refugee families from Afghanistan arrived in Midway they were tired and worn out. They had evacuated from a war-torn country and traveled for months to get here. Even though they had been through a lot, when we dropped in to visit, they insisted on welcoming us in. They served us tea and cookies and the almonds and raisins we had brought for them. It was humbling and done with such sincerity. It made you want to laugh with surprise.

This kind of hospitality is what Abraham and Sarah offer. They offer it with sincerity and skill and it's a good thing, because these strangers

ARE special. This is none other than the Lord coming to pay them a visit. As they eat, these strangers predict that in due time, Sarah will have a son. Sarah overhears this statement from the tent. And maybe it was meant to be one of those polite things that people say. Maybe it was part of a toast or a compliment. Maybe it was just men talking like men, not understanding how things are with women. Sarah hears them repeat the promise God made but never kept. And she laughs. “Ha, ha, ha! Now that’s a joke, isn’t it?” It’s humor tinged with bitterness, tinged with sorrow.

Her laugh was a bit louder than she intended. It echoes across the campsite. Loud and clear. Sharp and resentful. They hear it. We hear it. And we know it’s a laugh that hides misery. It confesses hopelessness. Sarah has waited and waited and waited for her promise. But now it’s impossible for her. God has missed the boat. And these strangers don’t understand that.

It feels like a bad joke to her and Sarah laughs at God. But let’s not forget that Abraham laughed too. Not too many years before this, God had visited Abraham and reminded him that he and Sarah would have a

son; and Abraham laughed at God. And now, it's Sarah's turn. But this time, God calls her out. "Why is Sarah laughing?" Yikes. The humor isn't shared. It turns awkward, into a cringe-worthy comedy of yes you did, no I didn't. And now everyone feels embarrassed when this was meant to be God's big moment of good news.

This scene with Sarah, it's so human, isn't it? To laugh when things go wrong. To use laughter to deflect our feelings, to break the tension, to defuse a situation. We laugh as a coping mechanism or even as a weapon. Laughter can become ridicule. It can become mocking.

Someone becomes a joke for our enjoyment. The Marty McFly, we bully at school. The Tonya Harding we use as a punchline. And Sarah was tired of being a punchline. She was tired of being a joke to others.

Sarah had believed that God would do something wonderful. She put her faith in a future God would build. And a blessing God would give. But she had to wait. And the waiting stretched out so long, it seems more and more unlikely. Heartache piled up. Disappointment compounded. She felt like a fool.

Sometimes, we can feel like fools too. Having faith in a promise that so many doubt. Believing in a God that so many question. And trusting that this God is good. That this God is working out our salvation every day. And implementing a plan to redeem everything. That all the emptiness will be turned into fullness. And the endings into new beginnings. And death into new life. We are fools to believe that in spite of the problems and setbacks, God will keep God's promise and work a miracle of new life in us.

It seems like a joke. It seems silly to wait on God and trust in a powerful possibility beyond ourselves. That's what Paul writes in his letter to the Romans. He reminds the church that faith means waiting. It means holding on for the impossible. It means developing long-term endurance in our spirit in Jesus' promise that prisoners can be set free, and enemies can be friends. and hearts of stone can be turned into hearts of flesh.

That God can change situations and change people. God can change us. And we might laugh out loud at the unexpected things God does. Like being born in a manger (ha!) and having his first visitors be shepherds and astrologers. And teaching us that the last will be first and the least

will be the greatest. And that believing in love is the most important thing we can do. Because love is so powerful that even death can stop it. The rest of the world will say: “Ho Ho! Yeah, right. You’ve GOT to be kidding.” And we will smile and wait. And remember Abraham and Sarah. And know that God can do the impossible. All it will take is time for the laughter of scorn to turn into the laughter of delight.

We have faith that in due time, God does what God promises. Because Sarah did conceive, and she had a baby boy. And when that baby arrived safe and sound, Sarah and Abraham laughed with delight. They laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. At the absurdity that she was 90 and he was 100. That they were old enough to be this child’s grandparents or great grandparents. And that this shouldn’t have been possible. That this in no way was their doing; it was God’s doing. They weren’t perfect, and neither was their story. And yet, here they were; holding their promise. Holding the proof that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. And they name their baby, Isaac. Which means laughter. Because God is laughing with delight right along with them.



We are waiting for THAT laughter. Having faith means waiting on God. It means having that long-term trust in the promise. And it might be difficult. It might bring suffering and hardship and feeling like a fool in front of the world. But it makes us strong. Love comes to remind us we are beloved and to make us strong. To produce endurance. Which produces character. Which produces hope. Just by waiting and holding on to God's promises because God is holding on to us. God wants to bless us. And we are worthy of that blessing. Nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. Because no one is ever too far gone. Wait and see. God's steadfast love for us endures forever. Wait and see. The laughter we long for will be ours. Wait and see. It will be so.