

“No Laughing Matter”  
Genesis 18:1-14

July 21, 2019

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Who doesn't enjoy a good laugh? We tell jokes, tease people, and make light of things in order to get people to laugh. Laughter helps break the ice between strangers. Laughter cheers our spirit when we are sad. Laughter helps us to feel better when things are bad. As the old saying goes, “Laughter is the best medicine.” (Although one poster warned, “Laughter is the best medicine. But if you are laughing without reason, then you probably do need medicine.”) Research has shown that laughter can indeed provide some health benefits. Researchers have found that laughter improves the function of blood vessels and increases blood flow, which can help protect against a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems. Laughter reduces pain and allows toleration of discomfort. Laughter is a good thing.

However, laughter is not always a good thing. In some situations, laughter is not appropriate. When something goes wrong, people will say that it is “no laughing matter.” Laughter can be hurtful when it shows disdain for another person. For example, someone pays you a compliment and your responses to laugh it off. Laughter can also show disbelief of something very unbelievable. For example, your first response to someone saying that you've just won \$1 million may be to laugh out loud rather than take it seriously. When what they said turns out to be true, then you have simply shown that you didn't believe them.

This is the situation we have in our text today from Genesis which is, indeed, no laughing matter. Approximately 24 years before our text, the Lord had called Abram to leave his country, his family, and his father's house to go to a place that he had not yet shown him. He promised him many descendants and that he would make of these many descendants a great nation. Although Abraham was no spring chicken (he was 75 years old time), he took off for Canaan with his wife, Sarah, his nephew Lot, and their families.

The time passed and, although Abraham was a fairly wealthy man, there were not any descendants. In fact, there was not even a single child yet born to them. The promise of many descendants forming a great nation was in jeopardy. Abraham tried to “fix” the problem, first by planning to adopt one of his servants, Eliezer, and making him the heir. Then Abraham tried to produce an heir with Hagar, the servant of Sarah. But the Lord appeared to him and reiterated His promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a son.

So much time had passed that both Abraham and Sarah despaired of having a child. Both of their biological clocks had stopped ticking. Then, one day, the Lord and two angels appeared in human form and visited Abraham. After Abraham dutifully performed the tasks of a host by providing food, rest, and shelter for his guests, the Lord dropped this little biological bombshell, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”

One could hardly be surprised at the response of the 89-year-old Sarah. She laughed. The premise was so absurd. The text had already said that she and Abraham were old and advanced in years. “The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.” That's pretty self-evident. Even Sarah recognized the impossibility here. She says, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old (her husband Abraham), shall I have pleasure?”

Usually, Sarah shoulders the criticism for this laughter. However, in the chapter immediately before our text, when God had reiterated His promise to Abraham privately, “I will bless Sarah and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations. Kings of peoples shall come from her.” Abraham's reaction? Some of you may remember the abbreviation when chatting online ROFL. It means, “Rolling On the Floor

Laughing.” That was Abraham’s reaction. The text says, “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child born to a man who is hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is 90 years old, bear a child?’”

With the success of God’s plan of salvation through the nation founded by Abraham in jeopardy, this was no laughing matter. The lack of faith on the part of Abraham and Sarah was evident. Abraham was essentially laughing in the face of God and His promise. And Sarah, although she was hiding in the tent at the time, was revealing her disbelief of God’s promise. One might want to cut them some slack because the promise was so unbelievable. However, the nature of faith is believing that which is unbelievable and trusting God to carry it out. Simply speaking, Abraham and Sarah did not do that.

People today still make a laughing matter out of the Word of God and His promises. When we look at the moral state of affairs in our world today, it is quite evident that people are laughing in God’s face by the way they behave and live. People, both those who claim to be Christians as well as those who do not claim to be Christians, laugh at what God says regarding having no other gods, honoring the Lord’s name, and gladly gathering to hear His Word on a regular basis by chuckling as they make some person or some thing the god of their lives, use God’s name to curse their golf ball for going out of bounds, and saying they have other things they have to do on a Sunday morning.

. People laugh out loud when the quaint notion of waiting until marriage to enjoy sexual intercourse, that marriage is a union between a man and a woman for life, and that other sexual expressions are opposed to the Word of God.

Even for faithful Christians, the idea of chuckling or even laughing out loud at the will of God is not unknown. When the preacher tells us that God requires us to be holy as He is holy, we might chuckle at that and think that the preacher is exaggerating just a little bit. When the preacher goes on to say that we all are guilty of violating God’s law, not only by the deeds we do, but also by the words we write and the thoughts we think, we may guffaw at that and think that the preacher is just being overly sensitive. When the preacher goes on to say that anyone and everyone who has violated the Law of God even once is guilty and deserves physical death now and eternal death later, might chuckle at that, too, and think that the preacher is just frustrated and taking it out on us.

On the other hand, when the same preacher informs us of all the unbelievable good which God has for us – forgiveness, full and free, for all sins of thought and word, in addition to deed; a peace beyond human understand and an assurance that the Lord is with us now, no matter what evil may be happening in our lives; and eternal life after we die in a place which is beyond our imagination; in a situation beyond our wildest dreams; and certainly beyond any experience here on earth – we may chuckle and say, “I wish.”

We may laugh it off as being too good to be true. Many people today, even Christians, are so cynical and jaded that they can’t possibly imagine an existence with there is no evil, no suffering, no sorrow, and no pain and so they (and, maybe, we at times) laugh this off as “pie in the sky” dreaming which has no connection to our life here and now.

With the eternal salvation of our souls at stake, none of this is a laughing matter, either. To regard God’s will so lightly and to try and laugh our way out of it shows disrespect for God and disbelief in His will. The consequences for such an attitude and actions could be severe. However, what did the Lord do in the case of Abraham and Sarah?

Although the Lord was not happy that Sarah laughed, His response was in the form of a question: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” This is a great question, the answer to which we believe in theory, but which we have difficulty believing when it actually comes into play. I’m sure that, if you had asked Abraham and Sarah twenty-five years prior to this whether they

believed God had all power and could do anything, they probably would've said, "Yes." However, now, when everything was on the line, it was more difficult and so they laughed because they did not believe.

The question asked by the Lord was likely rhetorical in nature. In other words, the Lord was not asking for Abraham and Sarah to submit answers of what could've been too difficult for God to do. Instead, through this rhetorical question, the Lord was making a statement: "There is nothing too hard for me to do."

In this case, there was nothing too hard. Within the year that followed, the Lord did give to Abraham and Sarah a son. A 90-year-old woman and 100-year-old man had a baby in the normal human way. What was impossible by nature of ever happening was done by the Lord without so much as a whiff of difficulty. The happy new parents name the baby, Isaac, which means "he laughs" in the Hebrew language and would be a constant reminder that each of them had laughed in God's face and disbelieved His promise.

The Lord's plan for making a great nation out of the descendants of Abraham was preserved by doing what seem to be biologically impossible, but a snap for our Lord. What about our situation? What about the Lord's plan to gain for us forgiveness, restoration with our Lord, and an eternal life beyond our imagination?

The people of God after Abraham and Sarah waited as eagerly and anxiously as Abraham and Sarah had waited for God to keep His promise. Finally, God acted and made a whopper of a promise. Another miraculous birth would occur, but this one even more spectacular than the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. The Lord sent the angel Gabriel to a young virgin named Mary to inform her she would become pregnant without the aid of a man. Say what? The child to be born from her womb would be the Son of God Himself and the Savior for the entire world. Say what? He would come and redeem His people by earning forgiveness for their sin and by gaining for them eternal life.

This is a promise beyond belief, but Mary didn't laugh. She probably was too afraid by the appearance of an angel. She did, however, ask how this would be since she was a virgin. The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God."

Mary still didn't laugh, but believed. Just in case Mary or any who heard this promise after her might think of laughing or doubting, the angel of the Lord responded to Mary with a paraphrase of what the Lord had said to Sarah so many years ago. He said, "For nothing will be impossible with God." The rhetorical question is replaced by a definite statement.

And it's true – nothing is impossible with God. The eternal infinite God was able to enter the womb of a mortal finite young girl and be born as a human child. He was able to grow up and keep the Law of God perfectly in our place and for our sake. He was able to take the sin of the world to the cross and bear the punishment which we deserved. He was able to rise from the dead to new life in order to gain life for us. As far-fetched as this whole scenario might seem to be, nothing was impossible for Him.

But that's not it. The birth of Isaac was not the completion of the Lord's plan, but the beginning of it. It would not be for hundreds of years – long after the deaths of Sarah and Abraham – when the Messiah would come and complete the Lord's plan. The promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in the heaven and the innumerable grains of sand on the seashore was finally achieved. Yet Abraham believed that which he would not see nor experience.

God is not yet finished with us, either. He has made astounding promises to us. Jesus will return and bring us to a home He has been preparing for us ever since He ascended to heaven. It will be a place so magnificent that we cannot even imagine it. As the Scriptures

say, "For eye has not seen; nor ear heard; nor has it entered into the mind of man what the Lord has prepared for those who love him."

Although this may happen tomorrow, it may take hundreds of years as it did for Abraham. We may never see it occur. Yet, we believe and wait. We do not laugh at how absurd this sounds when we live in a world now with such troubles. We know that there is nothing too hard for the Lord. We believe that nothing will be impossible with God.

Laughter at such promises is not an appropriate thing. However, I'm sure Abraham and Sarah likely learned from their experience with the birth of their son, Isaac, that they never laughed at God's promise again. We, too, can learn from our past experiences in doubting or laughing off something God has promised. We learn again and again that God is faithful in keeping His promises no matter how impossible they may seem to us. The Word of God proclaims this. Our experience shows this time and time again. Our faith clings to this promise over and over again.

So, let us get back to laughing, not in disdain for God or disbelief in His promises. Rather, we laugh for joy. We laugh Satan to scorn. He has been defeated. He can no longer harm us, defeat us, or take God's promises away from us. We laugh at the perpetrators of evil in this world who think they are in control. They are not. They shall be overthrown like Satan and the power which they thought they have will be lost.

We laugh with pure joy at what God has done for us. We laugh with pure joy that God has kept every single one of His promises. And, as we face very difficult times ahead, we still laugh with pure joy, knowing that God will continue to keep his promises, to rescue us from this evil age, and to bring us to our home in heaven with Him.

There's another old saying about laughter which goes like this: "We are not laughing at you but with you." This was intended to comfort those who felt as if people were laughing at them. This was said usually by people who were laughing at us. But it is true in this case here. We are not laughing at God. We are laughing with God. Psalm 2 says, "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed... He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision." God is indeed laughing. He is overjoyed at His victory through His Son, Jesus Christ. We share that victory, that laughter and that joy with Him for all eternity. What started out as no laughing matter – dishonoring God and disbelieving His promises – has become the greatest reason for laughing of all time. So, laugh it up for all eternity. Amen.