

GOD'S OUTRAGEOUS SENSE OF HUMOR¹

Genesis 18: 1-15

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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On this Father's Day, we read a story about Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith. But this little episode of this life focuses more on Sarah, a Jewish mother, or perhaps we should say THE Jewish mother. In the story three strangers have shown up at their tent, and with the extraordinary hospitality of a nomad, Abraham hurries to have some food prepared for them. While the men are eating, they hear something strangely like a giggle— the kind of giggle that gets worse and worse. Soon they are sure that is a woman laughing.

I

When they pull the curtain aside Sarah loses complete control. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts to shake with laughter. She rocks back and forth, unable to stop, holding her stomach, full of wheezes and tears. She is laughing because she is pushing ninety-one years and she just heard the visitors tell her husband that she would have a baby. Of course, out of courtesy to the visitors, Abraham has kept a straight face, but when he sees Sarah he cracks up too. Maybe even the

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three visitors break out in laughter as well, and soon they are all laughing too hard even to talk.

Well, the old pair probably needed a good laugh, for they had been through some rough times together. Years before, Abraham had taken the notion that God wanted them to pull up stakes and move to Canaan where God would make him the father of a great nation, which is what they did, and that's where their troubles started. Once they reached the Promised Land, a nasty situation developed between Abraham and his in-laws. Lot and his crowd claimed that the place wasn't big enough for both of them, and Abraham and his crowd said they couldn't agree more. So Abraham agreed to divide the land in two and each of them take half, but Abraham made the mistake of telling Lot that he could have the first choice. So Lot chose the fertile pastureland around the Jordan River, and Abraham was left with a disaster area resembling the Mojave Desert.

Then as the years rolled by Abraham and Sarah discovered that they didn't stand a chance to be the parents of anything. So they had settled down into their nineties with some regrets but all-in-all glad to be alive for a few more years. That's when the three strangers made their startling announcement. They said that God had made a promise and would stick

to it, and that by this time next year Sarah would have a baby boy. One account of this story says that Abraham fell on his face laughing!²

So there we have it: Abraham and Sarah laughing hard at the incongruity of it all, laughing at the absurdity of it all, laughing at the outrageous humor of God! But the punch line in the story comes toward the end when one of the strangers looks into the incredulous face of Sarah and says, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Or, as some translations have it, “Is anything impossible with God?”

II

That’s the question the storyteller wants us to hear as we laugh with Abraham and Sarah over how outrageous this situation is. Is anything too wonderful, too difficult, too impossible when it comes to God? There is a popular form of religious faith that has a firm and unwavering belief in a tame and innocuous divinity. It is a faith that assumes that God is content with the status quo, that what is must always be, and that anything else is impossible. You could call this faith functional deism. Functional deism never denies the existence of God, but it also never expects God to make a difference in the world or in our lives. This story rebukes the functional deism of Abraham and Sarah.

² Genesis 17: 17.

And when a year later their son is born, they name him Isaac, which in Hebrew means “laughter.” I once knew a couple who had a child late in life and named her “Joy” to remind them of the wonderful surprise she was. Here they named their son “laughter” to remind them of their incredulous laughter. Later, at Isaac’s circumcision, Sarah stands up, clinks her wine glass, and says, *God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me....Who would ever have said that Abraham and Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age?*³

Sarah’s laughter reflects our own tendency to laugh at the impossibility of things changing. This church is nearly 200 years old; how can we birth new life when we are old? Our functional deism says that it’s just the nature of religion these days. People don’t go to church anymore like they used to. This is New England, for heaven’s sake. Our pews will never be filled to capacity! It’ll never be like the old days! And the strangers look at our cynical laughter and say, “Is anything too wonderful for God?”

Sarah’s laughter is the laughter that thinks it is impossible to change. When the visitor says, “Is anything too wonderful for God?” he is inviting her to change the nature of her laughter and to let the surprise back into

³ Genesis 21: 6-7.

her life. And he invites us to do the same. It is only when our sense of the impossibility of our lives meets God's great surprise of grace and promise that we are enabled to live our lives with the outrageous sense of possibilities that God intended.

Is anything too wonderful for God? That is an overwhelming question that demands an answer. Answer ~~Yes!~~ and the world of possibility is shut down, the universe is closed, and God is no longer God: benevolent, maybe; kindly and concerned, perhaps; but ultimately powerless in the face of what we call reality. But answer ~~No!~~ that there is nothing too hard for God, and the possibilities are endless.

But be aware that we better be ready to be shaken out of our customary, stable, reliable, routine, ordinary, conventional, commonplace, boring existence. Sarah will go through a pregnancy in her nineties! The question is, do we really want to believe that with God nothing is impossible? For if we do believe that, then we can no longer be content to keep living our lives as though business were normal. Crazy things can happen with God and they usually do.

III

One final word: when laughter goes, so does hope. When God reaffirms the promise to Abraham and Sarah, God restores not only their

faith, but their ability to laugh as well. But now their laughter is not cynical; it is pure delight. Only those who can find wisdom in humor can believe in the face of the impossible.

Years later, the Apostle Paul would be the first to come right out and say it. In his letter to the church at Corinth, he wrote about the folly of the gospel: *...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* And then he speaks about God's outrageous sense of humor. He says, *For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*⁴

⁴ I Corinthians 1: 23-25.