

## Genesis 18:1-15 God Has Brought Me Laughter

The lectionary readings for this Sunday stood out to me because they were all compelling. Each Sunday, there is a Psalm, a reading from the Gospels, from the Old Testament, and one from the Epistles. The major texts are read on Sundays over a three year rotation and so become the focal passages for sermons.

In most weeks, one of the readings will stand out above the others and so the choice of text on which to concentrate is easy, but it was not that way this week. As I read through them I wanted to preach from them all and it was a difficult choice. Even the alternate readings, which there sometimes are, were attractive.

The first reading from the Psalms is from the 116th where praise and thanksgiving is offered to God because the psalmist has been rescued from trouble. and the Call to Worship is the 100th Psalm, which is the alternative Psalm.

### In the Synagogues

The Gospel text is from Matthew 9 and 10 and relates the calling of the disciples and pictures Jesus with the people who seem lost, “like sheep without a shepherd.”

When Jesus began his preaching and teaching career he traveled around, “preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness.”

Seeing the crowds, we are told he was filled with compassion, an indisputable aspect of the character of Jesus. More importantly, this deep feeling is revealed to be not only the character of Jesus, but the very character of God.

### Exodus

The alternative Old Testament reading is from Exodus 19, in which Moses is on the mountain and God commands him to tell Israel that they shall be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” affirming that their experience of God as a liberator is not meant for them alone, but for everyone.

This, “setting free” of the captives is not meant to be thought of as something God just happened to do for a favored people because they happened to need it at the time. In the telling of the Exodus story, the very nature of the human situation is revealed; we are all in need of freedom, and the character of God as liberator is revealed as well.

## Romans 5

You will notice the text at the top of your bulletin comes from Romans 5:8, which comes from the Epistle reading for this week. In this remarkable passage we learn that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope; that God's forgiveness is made available while we are still sinning; that forgiveness does not come after repentance but before it. We are not forgiven because we repent, rather we repent because we have been forgiven.

And these are not just the mechanical details of the salvation process so we can know how to turn them on when we think we need them, but the essence of God's very being. "God has poured out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

### Sarah and the Three Visitors

Another characteristic about God is revealed in the Old Testament reading, which comes from Genesis and tells the story of the visit of the messengers to Abraham and Sarah, when in their old age they are informed that at long last they will become parents. The story is familiar enough. Three men showed up one day by the great trees at Mamre, to the place where the old couple lived.

Abraham was very concerned to show them the proper hospitality. He told Sarah to prepare some bread and he chose a calf and had it prepared and gave it to them.

Then they asked about Sarah and he said that she was in the tent, and then God spoke up, "I will come back next year, and Sarah will have a son." She happened to be listening from inside the tent and when she heard the news, she laughed out loud (lol).

She laughed at the idea of it. "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Quite frankly, she laughed because she didn't believe it. Later, when she was asked about it, she lied and said she didn't, but God knew the truth and said, "yes, but you did laugh."

Two chapters later, we are told that when the child was born they named him Isaac, which means, "laughter," because as she put it, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she was right.

This description of events is not just "the way things happened to turn out," but a revealing of God, and in this case the surprising news is the laughter and the scene is rife with surprising joy as the impossible is turned into reality after all and when Sarah laughs,

God laughs too, because, after all, laughter is the child's name.

## Knowing

It comes down to this: we mean something different when we say we know some thing than we do when we say we know someone. When, in reading the bible, the focus is on knowing things, we are bound to be disappointed; not primarily because the bible is inaccurate, but because it is lacking.

There is a little history and some literature in it but nothing about Physics, Chemistry, Biology, or Calculus, or Computers, or Cars or Space Travel. The Yellow Pages answers more questions, or should I say Google. In the same way, we can know all about someone and be disappointed if we do not see into their soul.

The Bible answers this one supreme question, not really so much about God, but because it is a revealing of God; the Bible is the opening of God's heart and the pouring out of God's soul, so that we can know . . .

The compassion, the freedom, the forgiveness, the laughter; are all a part of the great discovery.

## Upside Down

But let me warn you a little, when God shows up at your door like those three visitors did at Abraham and Sarah's tent, things can get a little interesting. In fact, your whole life may get turned upside down. We get used to being in the wilderness. We get used to life without God, there are some things we grow to like about it, at least we come to trust the routines of our lives.

Life with God may begin with incredulous laughter, and it may even turn into joyous laughter, but it won't leave things unchanged. Those of you who have children, think of how your lives changed permanently and in ways which you never imagined.

Initially there might be delight but later it will deepen with crazy changes because as we come to know fully, as Paul put it, we will also be fully known. But in the end we will join in the gospel chorus; that

God has forgiven me, while I was yet sinning; God has healed me when I suffered every kind of sickness and disease; God has set me free when I experienced every kind of captivity;

And with Sarah herself, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

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