

Genesis 18:1-10  
July 17, 2022

## Something to Laugh About

Where does one begin to tell the story of faith? The people who authored the Bible, under the inspiration of the Spirit, could not begin, but at the beginning,\* which they did, and then quickly transitioned into the pre-history of Israel, beginning with Abraham, the father of the holy nation, and his wife Sarah.

The story is familiar enough. Abraham lived near where southern Iraq is presently. He believed that God had promised to make him the father of a great nation, so he left his hometown and went to the land promised to him, which turned out to be Canaan, the land of Israel. The only hitch in the get-along was that he had no heir.\*

Even though he had sacrificed everything on this promise, when the time for Sarah to have children passed without children, things became bleak and dim. The text we have read today finds Sarah and Abraham living out their days. What else could they do? I would like to say that they were living out their days faithfully, but, of course, that is not entirely true.

Sarah had given one of her servant girls to Abraham to have a baby for her. This was not faithfulness. There is a significance in this part of the story, because it reveals that God is able to accomplish the divine purpose even when the chosen people have failures of faith, as did Sarah, as did Abraham.

So that wasn't the end of the story. Nor was Sarah's age, she was 90, or her barrenness, as they unceremoniously called it. It is to the part of the story just previous to the birth of Isaac that we turn. The old couple managing to live out their lives in the new land, without any chance of receiving what they had been promised, when two men stopped by one day. They predicted that within a year, Sarah would have a baby.

When Sarah, who was in the tent where they lived when the angels proclaimed their news, heard it, she laughed. Right out loud. And her laughter is as important a part of the story as the birth of the son was.

The best description of the meaning of the laughter that I have ever run across comes from Frederick Buechner, who makes a fuss about their laughter. I have read excerpts from his reflections before, years ago, and believe they are worth reading again. After contemporizing the scene by commenting that they laughed at the idea of a baby's being born in the geriatric ward and medicare's picking up the tab, he continued:

“ . . . they are laughing because the angel not only seems to believe it, but seems to expect them to believe it too. They are laughing because with part of themselves they do believe it. They are laughing because with another part of themselves they know it would take a fool to believe it. They are laughing because laughing is better than crying and maybe not even all that different. They are laughing because if by

some crazy chance it should just happen to come true, then they would really have something to laugh about . . .

Maybe the most interesting part of it all is that far from get angry at them for laughing, God told them that when the baby was born he wanted them to name him Isaac, which in Hebrew means laughter. So you can say that God not only tolerated their laughter but blessed it, and in a sense joined in it, which makes it a very special laughter indeed - God and human beings laughing together, sharing a glorious joke in which both of them are involved . . . “ (Telling the Truth, p. 50, 53)

The biblical text is only in what would become the 18th chapter in the Bible. It takes all the way to near the end of the Gospel of John before we read about the tears that Jesus shed at the death of his friend Lazarus. In a way the whole biblical story is cradled between the laughter of Sarah and the tears of Jesus. My guess is that it is not often thought of in that way.

When we are laughing, especially if it is a good hearty, almost uncontrollable laughter, either at something so good, like the birth of a child or the end of a war, or just at something funny, my guess is we may not be thinking about God so much, being caught up in the moment the way we sometimes are.

And when we cry, or are at least tempted to cry, when something tragic happens, like another shooting or another war or just another argument between friends

or family, we are tempted to see God as the cause, or if not the cause, at least the one responsible for the failure to prevent the tragedy.

I hear all the time people talking about the truth of the Bible and how they believe whatever it says no matter what, and wonder if they have read it; or from others who wonder why anyone still reads a book like the Bible, written by people who lived thousands of years ago and didn't know anything; they didn't know about modern technologies like cars and planes and spaceships, or televisions or smartphones or computers; people who thought the earth was young and flat who practiced polygamy and slavery, and had poor hygiene habits and bad diets to boot, didn't know about things like democracy, neither side really listening to what the Bible is really telling us.

Which is that God is present in both our worst and our best experiences; that the two are wrapped up together and not just in our minds, which all our doctrines would seem to imply because they address the intellect, but actually in the nitty-gritty where we hope and despair, where we celebrate and suffer, and where we feel those unspeakable feelings that sometimes come out as laughter and tears. God is not just in the room with us, but actually in the tears and the laughter with us, the sorrow and the joy of things.

I don't watch late night television much anymore, but I remember the days of Johnny Carson, and then Leno/ Letterman, before it all became a comedic free-for-all. I remember Jay Leno used to tell provocative jokes

and then look for someone in the audience trying not to laugh. If he caught them he would say, “you laughed, don’t deny it,” as if the laughter justified the borderline inappropriateness of the joke, as if any objection to telling such jokes was destroyed by the laughter of the one trying to raise the objection.

There seems to be a similar thing going on here, because when God confronts Sarah, she denies that she laughed, so that the text ends with these words,

“No, but you did laugh!”

Where does one begin to tell the story of faith? It seems not too far from the beginning is Sarah’s laughter, born of unbelief, turned into hope, raised to the fulness of faith.

After all that we as human beings have been through in our history, all that we presently face, and will inevitably endure, however we account for it, there is great promise that in the end, after the wonder and the pain of life, there is something to laugh about, we will not be able to hold it in.

And that laughter, whatever its motivation, will be made into the laughter of pure joy at the redemption of our lives, and of the world.