



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Laughing Out Loud

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ OCTOBER 24, 2021

Introduction

What makes you laugh? We laugh for all sorts of reasons, so I suspect that it is different for every one of us. The most obvious source of laughter is when we snicker at something that is humorous, the way that a joke or a movie might make us laugh. But even within this source, we each have different senses of humor. Some people have a dry sense of humor, and a simple turn of a few witty words can stir a chuckle. My daughter, apparently, has this type of a sense of humor. She wrote on a project that she made for me for father's day that her favorite thing about her dad is his "cheesy dad jokes." I promptly informed her that I would hold on to that as a reminder for her when she becomes a teenager and no longer thinks I'm funny! By the way, you know how you can tell a dad joke, right? It's **apparent** [groaning is the only appropriate response]! Some like dry or cheesy jokes. Others enjoy observational humor or situational comedy. Still others enjoy physical comedy, like the slapstick humor of *The Three Stooges* of a previous generation. So the vast array of humor is one of the reasons people laugh, but it is far from the only reason!

Sometimes we laugh simply because others are laughing. A video made by Coca-Cola a few years ago captured this phenomenon. As a man watched his phone screen with earbuds in, he began giggling, and it was a sort of infectious laugh—even before the pandemic! First he laughed just a little, then more, and finally he is howling. What was really interesting about the video was the response of others on the train. His laughter first resulted in people looking at one another. Gradually, it led to smiles and laughter around the train-

car. One individual's own laughter became infectious! Sometimes we laugh not just because something is funny, but simply because we respond to the joy within others. Remember this for later...

Laughter is fascinating because it is an involuntary response. Most times, we can't help it. When something funny happens, laughter follows like smoke from fire. That's why sometimes you laugh and a snort sneaks out! But the involuntary response can occasionally happen at something that is not funny. Not only is it not funny, but it can even occur at inappropriate times! On Sunday nights as a kid, my family would often watch *America's Funniest Home Videos*, which I believe is still on today with a different host. If you have never watched the show, unscientific observation indicates that about 83% of the videos shown capture awkward moments when one probably should not laugh. There is the standard wedding video where people are taking pictures on a rickety, old dock. Usually that video lasts about 25 suspenseful seconds as you just wait for the dock to give way and the bride fall into the water. For that bride, it was probably **not** immediately funny! And yet we find ourselves laughing at her and hoping she'll be able to laugh in hindsight. Other videos are frequently of people getting hurt! Any time there is a dad and a kid with a baseball bat, you know what's coming! The bat or the ball is going to strike Dad! I am convinced that *America's Funniest Home Videos* has conditioned an entire generation to laugh when people are hurt (presuming they are not seriously hurt, of course). Sometimes, we laugh at inappropriate times.

Sometimes, we laugh when we are expecting one thing and something else happens. In those situations it is the juxtaposition of two seemingly incompatible concepts, or the realization that your expectations have been violated, that results in involuntary laughter. Believe it or not, what we are going to talk about today pertains to this type of laughter: laughter that occurred at a most inappropriate time—and in response to a sure promise of God!

So far, throughout this service, we have been anticipating a central question regarding the nature of God, one which will be asked by

God in the text we will read today. Our scripture passage will come from Genesis 18:1-15, and the question we are considering is the penultimate verse we will read. Here's what you need to know.

Our promise-making, promise-keeping God has been working His purposes out. In chapter 12 of Genesis, God called a man named Abram, who was 75 years old at the time, and made a promise to him saying, [Not because of anything you've done, but because of who I am] "I will bless you and you will be a blessing to all people. All the families of the earth will be a blessed through you." A few verses later, in verse 7, God repeats His promise: "I will give this land *to your descendants.*" Abram's immediate response must have been, "God, You must be joking!" Because Abram is 75 and, thus far, without any kids! God has quite a sense of humor here. And not only is Abram "advanced in years" when this promise is made, but his wife Sarai, introduced in Genesis 11:30, is unable to have children (interestingly, the only detail about her that is given, besides her name). God has made a rather surprising promise.

Imagine how difficult it would be to wait nine months for a kid if you were 75 years old. But it's not just nine months! Ten years later (in chapter 15), Abram is now 85 years old and becoming more than a little restless because God has not yet made good on that promise. God once again makes a promises of grace to Abram, and Abram replies, "What good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth" (Genesis 15:2). God assures him he'll have an heir of his own. He says, "Go outside and take a look at the stars of the sky. Your descendants will be just as numerous."

Still, more waiting. Seeing very little hope that God is going to come through, Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands. Sarai conspires with her husband, suggesting that they have a son by his servant Hagar, and Abram goes along with it. The resulting child is Ishmael. But Ishmael was never the intended result of God's promise. God's promise was that Abraham and Sarah would become parents.

So, when Abraham was 99 years old, God appeared to him again. This time, God says, “I am El Shaddai” (which means ‘God Almighty’). God gives this name because Abraham needs to believe in an almighty God if this surprising promise is ever going to come to fruition! God continues, “Serve me faithfully, and I’ll give you countless descendants” [Genesis 17:1-2]. At this news, which has come now a third time, Abraham’s inappropriate and involuntary response is that he laughs. He doesn’t just chuckle a little. He keels over and is rolling on the floor laughing. Still, God continues to proclaim the hope, and changes Abram’s name to Abraham—a name which means ‘father of many.’

This whole story has some humor in it. And like many good stories today, it is humor told right in the midst of a point of pain, as we will see. God reveals this good news of great joy one final time, which is our passage for today. The narrator tells us that the Lord appears to Abraham, but Abraham does not yet know it is the Lord. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

The LORD appeared again to Abraham near the oak grove belonging to Mamre. One day Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent during the hottest part of the day. ²He looked up and noticed three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran to meet them and welcomed them, bowing low to the ground.

³“My lord,” he said, “if it pleases you, stop here for a while. ⁴Rest in the shade of this tree while water is brought to wash your feet. ⁵And since you’ve honored your servant with this visit, let me prepare some food to refresh you before you continue on your journey.”

“All right,” they said. “Do as you have said.”

⁶So Abraham ran back to the tent and said to Sarah, “Hurry! Get three large measures of your best flour, knead it into dough, and bake some bread.” ⁷Then Abraham ran out to the herd and chose a tender calf and gave it to his servant, who quickly prepared it. ⁸When the food was

ready, Abraham took some yogurt and milk and the roasted meat, and he served it to the men. As they ate, Abraham waited on them in the shade of the trees.

⁹“Where is Sarah, your wife?” the visitors asked.

“She’s inside the tent,” Abraham replied.

¹⁰Then one of them said, “I will return to you about this time next year, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son!”

Sarah was listening to this conversation from the tent. ¹¹Abraham and Sarah were both very old by this time, and Sarah was long past the age of having children. ¹²So she laughed silently to herself and said, “How could a worn-out woman like me enjoy such pleasure, especially when my master—my husband—is also so old?”

¹³Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, ‘Can an old woman like me have a baby?’ ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

¹⁵Sarah was afraid, so she denied it, saying, “I didn’t laugh.”

But the LORD said, “No, you did laugh.”

Genesis 18:1-15 (NLT)

May God grant us understanding of these words.

Interpretation

We have already established that laughter is an involuntary response that occurs for a variety of reasons; sometimes as a response to humorous events, sometimes as we are “infected” by the laughter of others, and even at inappropriate times! When someone laughs, we tend to make interpretations about why they are doing it. For instance, did you ever find yourself wondering if someone was laughing *with* you or laughing *at* you? That interpretation changes everything. If they are laughing with us, no big deal. If they are laughing at us, well that is something entirely different. That type of laughter is a laugh of derision.

The Laugh of Derision

The scoffer's laugh is when someone is laughing at us. It is the way of laughing which is to mock or ridicule. It seeks to deride the individual or message that was presented by insinuating its ridiculousness. So, is that what is happening here? Is Sarah's laugh a laugh of derision? Let's take a closer look.

Theophanies like this occur throughout the Old Testament. God presents himself to Abraham appearing in the form of three men. Perhaps it is the Lord and two of His angels. Or perhaps, as a minority of scholars have suggested, this is even a prefigure of the eternal Trinity visiting the yet-to-be great patriarch. In contrast to how God shows up to Adam and Eve in the cool of the day in the Garden of Eden, God arrives in the hottest portion of the day, a time when most sane people in the Middle East wouldn't think of traveling. This may be the first indication that these travelers are not your normal travelers!

Abraham, who I will remind you is now 99 years old, like another father in a story told in the New Testament, sees the guests and RUNS to meet them. Apparently, at nearly 100, Abraham is still spry, not unlike those who live in Southwest Florida! Abraham shows the Lord and his messengers incredible hospitality; he washes their feet, he humbly offers them a feast, and he even offers a tender calf for them. Little did he know at the beginning of the encounter that he was entertaining God Himself! Wouldn't you like to be caught off guard and have this response? You're not expecting anyone, but someone you don't know shows up unexpectedly, and your response is lavish hospitality—after which you discover that your guest is God Almighty! I don't know about you, but when strangers come to my home, it's usually a rush for me to get them to leave! Not Abraham. He rushes to and fro to serve them and welcome them.

After some southern hospitality, the guests inquire as to the whereabouts of Sarah. This is Abraham's second indication that his Guest is not your standard traveler passing through, because even though Sarah has not yet appeared in this story, the Visitor knew Abraham's wife's name (perhaps because He's the one who changed it from

Sarai in the previous chapter! Abraham gradually becomes more aware of Who this visitor is and replies that she's inside the tent. To their utter astonishment, the Guest—El Shaddai, God Almighty—says, “I will return about this time next year, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son.”

Now, Sarah was in the tent and apparently the walls were paper thin (or perhaps goatskin thin)! Sarah overhears the divine announcement and, like Abraham had done previously, she laughs out loud and inadvertently. What's worse, the laughter is heard by God through the thin tent! Now, the almighty God would have heard it even if the walls of the tent were not thin, because there is nothing that occurs that is beyond God's awareness.

So is this a laugh of derision? I suspect not. Still, Sarah seems to be worried that this is how God would interpret her laugh, so she denies having laughed at all. But the all-knowing, all-powerful God confirms it. “No, you laughed.” You can't pull one over on God!

The Laugh of Disbelief]

I am convinced that this is not a laugh of derision, but a *laugh of disbelief*. What I suspect is going on here is that there are two incompatible pieces of information that defy expectations so much that Sarah cannot help but to laugh. It is a laugh that asks, “How could this be?” The announcement seems so improbable, so impossible!

For the better part of her life, Sarah has carried the burden of being barren. It has become a shameful part of her identity, a curse. Now, almost 90, her age, her aches and pains, and her biology have given her every indication that the childbearing days have long since left her. The notion of expecting a child is so unexpected that the juxtaposition of these two details leads to an uncontrollable, involuntary outburst of laughter, having caught her completely off guard. It isn't a laugh of derision, but of astonishment and disbelief.

This is why God responds by asking the question which our whole service has leaned toward. It is a question that gets to the heart of her laughter and to the core of our faith.

Is Anything Too Hard for God?

Even when every indication is that something is laughably impossible, **is anything too hard for God?**

Sometimes, when folks pose this question, it seems abstract, like asking, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” But this question is anything but an abstraction. Amidst this powerful and evocative narrative dealing with one of the most difficult of human experiences—namely, infertility—humanity does not ask the question of God, but **God asks Abraham and Sarah**. And this is the question that is posed to us, as well. If God can do anything, can God bring life even to whatever circumstances are in my life?

Given the challenges you are facing, as large and overwhelming as they seem, does God have the capacity to overcome them even if it seems impossible to us? God is asking you: “Do you believe this?” It could be the reality of an illness. It could be the overwhelming sense of grief at the loss of a loved one. It could be something that has you feeling pinned in or helplessly trapped. It might be a problem that seems too big for you to carry. Maybe it is a relationship that seems hopeless. Whatever it is, is that problem too difficult for God? Could God bring life even to that?

To this central question, it is very possible to provide the Sunday school response. Of course! If God is God—if He laid the foundations of the world—then, of course, nothing is too difficult for Him. Nothing is impossible for God. This is the concept that is implied by God when he reveals himself to Abraham as El Shaddai. The all-powerful, Almighty God has absolute sovereignty and authority over everything in creation, and that God is actively involved in everything.

This is why earlier in the narrative, God took Abraham out to show him the stars in the sky, as evidence to the power of God. It was as if God were saying, “If I created the world out of nothing—with all its beauty and intricate complexity—then it stands to reason that I have the power to work in this seemingly impossible situation for you.”

So nothing is too difficult for God. God has absolute power.

Still, it is possible to know this intellectually, but not let it seep down from the head to penetrate the heart. Abraham and Sarah knew that anything was possible for God, but the idea that God would visit them and that they would bear a child in their old age when their whole lives had seemingly gone by, seemed unlikely. It was too late.

Maybe you've felt that way. It's too late. Maybe if I was younger... Maybe if we didn't have so much history... Maybe if I hadn't made so many mistakes... It's too late. It may seem too late for you, but it's never too late for God. This is part of the surprising promises of God.

The Laugh of Delight!

The rest of the story continues in the same theme of laughter. Just as Abraham laughed when he heard the news, Sarah laughs. But it is God who has the last laugh. About a year later, Abraham and Sarah welcome a son, Isaac—whose name, by the way, means 'laughter.' And in this scene in chapter 21, Sarah is once again laughing, but not laughing in derision or disbelief. Now she is laughing in delight! The shame the world placed on her barrenness, now removed, has birthed a joy which seemed so unlikely that it stirs a joyful, infectious laughter. In chapter 21, verse 6, Sarah speaks again and says, "God has brought me laughter. All who hear about this will laugh with me." (Genesis 21:6, NLT) Note: They will not laugh at her, but they will laugh in delight *with* her.

At first, Sarah was laughing at the impossible contradictions of the promises of God and her own experience. Now, she is laughing *with* God who has brought her Isaac. And we all join with her in that joy!

The question God put to Abraham and Sarah returns in the form of a statement in the New Testament. Another divine announcement of birth is made, this time to a young woman named Mary. Her reply, according to Luke 2, is, "Nothing will be impossible for God." Even being raised from the dead. The son of promise, Isaac, led to the true Son of Promise, Jesus. God's promises are that sure, and for that we laugh in delight!

Today, there are various responses to faith in God. There are those who laugh in derision. Ha! How foolish are you to believe in God! There are those who laugh in disbelief, simply unable to accept faith in God in the face of the challenges and hardships of today. And then there are those who hear the promises of God and laugh in delight, for God's promises have been fulfilled in Jesus.

May we be those who laugh with delight. And may our joy be infectious, stirring joy in everyone in earshot! Amen. ■



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