

Making God Laugh
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Genesis 18:1-15; Hebrews 13:1-2

My grandmother used to say, whenever she did something silly, "I really make God laugh, don't I?" Whenever she said that, I would nod my head, and smile in agreement. But looking back, I'm not sure I was 'really in' on the joke. When I was young, you see, I was quite serious about a great number of things, including God. And maybe I didn't quite understand or appreciate Grandma's whimsical approach to life and faith.

But darn it all if that phrase of hers, "I make God laugh!" didn't stick in my head! Now that I'm older, I'm better at understanding what it was she was trying to tell me. Sometimes I'll even read scripture in preparation for Sunday and it'll all seem like one great big elaborate joke! And God is in on it.

In general, we don't think of the Bible that way, do we? As being funny or hilarious or whimsical? Well, I get that. It's mostly not. Many serious things happen in the Bible. Not many of the people featured in the story are slipping on bananas or telling off-color jokes.

That's not the kind of comedy we'll read here. This comedy comes from life, which means there's a little darkness in it. But I'm telling you, this story is meant to be funny.

And so, I'm going to do what no comedian should ever do. I'm going to explain the joke to you. I'm going to tell you why this is funny, and why you should care. And then if you decide to laugh, even laugh out loud, well, go ahead. You can make that decision when we get there.

The set-up begins, as many good ones do, with a surprise. And that surprise is that God is involved intimately with the human story. This God isn't some clockmaker in the sky, winding up some far away technology that will manage everything going forward, peering down from the clouds at his human creations. No. This Creator gets her hands dirty. That's the first surprise. The first joke.

The second joke is that God would choose as partners in this covenant people like Abraham and Sarah. They are wanderers, nomads, folks without a permanent home. Even for the Bronze Age, these people are not the first you would entrust with a sacred mission. But God chooses them.

And then we get to the mission itself – the third joke. Which is that God has told Abraham and Sarah that they will be parents of a great nation of people whose role in life will be simply to live in faithfulness to God.

But here's the painful punchline, the part that's not a joke. Abraham and Sarah can't have children, at least they haven't so far. And the hour is getting late. By the time we hear this part of their story, they are way past the age when they should be collecting Social Security. They are the age when folks expect to be enjoying their great-grandchildren. My guess is like any reasonable people, even faithful people, Abraham and Sarah have long given up on God's promise. And I'm sure that to them, to anyone who wants to be a parent and for some reason cannot be, their empty cradle is not funny. Just painful.

So, here we have Abraham past his prime, and Sarah can't even remember menopause. But then, out of nowhere, God shows up. Telling them that yes, it's still true, they'll be changing a kid's diapers soon. What do you know?

But that's not all that's funny about this encounter. First of all, the Lord appears to Abraham not as one person, but as three. It's so bizarre! There's no explanation for it, except that maybe God thought it was funny? I don't know. It's random. Abraham sees these three guys who are somehow also God (?) and follows the customs of his day, offering hospitality to these strange travelers. He says, "Let me get you a little something to drink, and a little bite to eat."

Meanwhile, he asks Sarah to make the equivalent of 30 loaves of Wonder bread while he goes out to the back to get a servant boy to slaughter a calf. It's a little overboard. And kind of funny!

Abraham was busy; falling all over himself to provide hospitality for these strangers. I have heard (and written) many sermons that make this the main point of the story and that we too should show hospitality to strangers in our midst because in doing so we also serve God.

And that's not a bad concept, in fact it's one that we need to hear!
But in reality, all Abraham is doing is what was culturally expected of him. Abraham didn't do it because he thought that he might be serving God, he did it because it was what you did.

In fact, theologian Thomas Bolin has argued that by showing hospitality, the host was actually showing dominance over the guest in order to assimilate them peacefully into the community. The guest played their part in accepting the hospitality in order to defuse future violent conflict. Yet, as Bolin points out, the function of this host-guest relationship is subverted in tales when the guest takes the form of the 'divine visitor', which leads to a moment of *theophany*, a revelation of the divine nature of the encounter.¹

Finally, after this tremendous feast was over and everyone is getting sleepy from overeating, we get to the main event. The laugh-out-loud joke. The statement so ridiculous it deserves a big snort. Abraham is chatting with the travelers, who remind him of the promise, that God will make Abraham and Sarah parents of a new people. They say that when they return in about a year, Sarah will have an infant son. Talk about a mic drop!

Meanwhile, Sarah is eavesdropping (which is another little joke—Sarah is such a snoop!) and she can't help herself. She's heard some tall tales in her day. Some real whoppers. But this is above and beyond! And so she does what any one of us does when we hear something too ridiculous to be true. We don't believe it. We might even laugh.

Sarah laughs. At the absurdity of this promise. And probably also the pain of waiting so many years. Of having to wait so long for God's promises to come true. If Sarah didn't laugh, maybe she would cry. But she laughs instead. And God hears it and calls her on it.

"I didn't laugh," Sarah says. And God has the last line. "Oh yes," God says. "You did laugh."

In a way, maybe what God was saying to Sarah was that, "I know it's hard to believe what I promised. Everything about this seems topsy-turvy to the ways of the world. You did laugh, but that's okay. You're not the first, nor the last, to laugh at what seems impossible. But that doesn't mean it can't happen."

¹ Bolin, Thomas M. "The Role of Exchange in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Its Implications for Reading Genesis 18-19," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 2004, 44-46.

See what I mean? It's a story filled with humor! One long joke. Maybe ones that I've taken all the humor out by explaining too much. I'm going to take a minute of pastoral privilege and just clarify a few things...

The joke isn't that Sarah has been barren for many years and that she deserved it, or that bad stuff sometimes happens to good people, or that God is capricious with blessings and punitive with punishments.

The joke has nothing to with any of that, because none of those things are funny. And of course, none of those things are true. The joke is just this... that nothing—absolutely nothing—is too wonderful for God.

We can forget or discount that sometimes. When we act like we're the center of the universe, when we feel the weight of the world on our shoulders and act like it, maybe we've missed the biggest joke of all - that nothing is impossible with God!

That is comedy. Not laugh out loud comedy, perhaps. More like divine comedy, which says the world is not just full of tragedy. Life isn't just death and taxes. Divine comedy says that life is full of God's little good surprises. Tucked around each corner, waiting for us outside every tent flap, if we're willing to poke our noses in it.

So, my jokester friends, when was the last time you made God laugh?

When you made a big assumption that turned out to be completely wrong?

When you feared the worst would happen, and things turned out just fine?

And while we're at it, when was the last time God made you laugh?

When a friend called, and it was the very person you needed to speak with?

When there were so many chipmunks on the ground that your dog didn't know which one to chase first?

When you got a difficult diagnosis and you've discovered gifts in it you never expected?

The complex covenant God established demands gracious hospitality, reverence, and service. But it also makes room for laughter, for spontaneity, and for genuine, uncensored gut reactions.

There is a tension here between, on the one hand, doing everything you possibly can to get ready for God, to do the right thing, to offer up the very best of yourself—and, on the other hand, just letting go and letting God, and being available to receive whatever the moment throws at you.

I think there's wisdom here for anyone who wants to create an environment of belonging, especially in this time, when the world around us is so harsh, so ready to pounce on non-conformity and imperfection with suspicion and judgement.

At MCC, we're called to create a different kind of space, one that is full of laughter yet gentler, more forgiving, more open to the comings and goings of real, messy human experience. We're called to balance intentionality and spontaneity in all that we do. We are called to be givers and receivers of mercy.

They say that comedy is pain plus time, but I think my Grandmother was spot on. Comedy is pain plus time, with a little dose of God's grace. And at some point, it doesn't matter who is making who giggle. God is so good. And I don't know about you, but I don't want to miss a single one of those jokes. Amen.