

# Laughing with God

sermon digest

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Genesis 17:1-8; 15:22; 18:11-14

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Like most heroes, the story of the first Hebrew Patriarch Abraham grows more ripe for myth in later Jewish and Christian memory than it appears in our earliest Genesis stories. For example, Paul makes of Abraham the prime example of justification by faith, but turns a blind eye toward Abe's dysfunctional family and sometimes cruel, ungodly behavior. According to Genesis, the man chosen for favor in the initiative of God is the recipient of an impossible dream. The name Abram, "exalted father," is symbolically changed by God to Abraham, "father of a multitude of nations." The promise to Abe of more descendants than the grains of sand on the seashore or stars in the sky is something of a joke. Abram and Sarai are childless. Sarai's infertility leads to the desperate act of offering her servant Hagar to Abram as a surrogate to produce the promised son, Ishmael, to manage the promise of God, to keep Abram from despair in his old age, and to save face for God.

But something funny happens on the way to fulfillment of the divine covenant. At the ripe old age of ninety-nine Abram gets the word from El-Shaddai, God Almighty, that wife Sarai, age ninety, is going to get pregnant and bear a son. "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" The scene is repeated when Sarah overhears the word from the angel to Abraham that she is to bear a son: "So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'"

Not so funny is the gender difference that emerges in the story. Abraham's laughter is ignored, but Sarah is accused of disbelief, laughing at God. John Otwell named his book *And Sarah Laughed* to deal with *The Status of Woman in the Old Testament*. We should not overlook the main point in the story that the name of the son, also assigned by God, is to be Isaac, "laughter." Joel Kaminsky interprets the whole story of Isaac in Genesis as a grand joke and notes that we usually miss the humor because we tend to approach the Bible without humor ("Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," *Interpretation*, Oct, 2000). Could it be that the earliest Jews detected the humor in real life and found laughter in the Abraham-Sarah saga to match their experience of life?

**Humor is a valid response to tragedy.** The tragedy in the story is a failed promise of God compounded by advancing age, infertility, menopause, impotency, and, for many of us, no laughing matter. But viewed in the larger scope of Jewish history, the humor rises to the surface. I particularly like the interpretation in early Christian history in Hebrews 11:11-12: "By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born." Fathering a child when you're "as good as dead" borders on the ridiculous.

On Saturday mornings, we usually wake up at 6:00 AM with a cup of coffee and the PBS TV program "Religion and Ethics News Weekly." Most of the material is very serious, concerning issues of human suffering and stories of involvement and response from world religions. Last week we were entertained by a segment on "Old Jews Telling Jokes." It featured an interview of Harvard professor Ruth Wisse, whose latest book, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*, takes a serious but entertaining look at the long-standing tradition of Jewish humor. She notes that humor is a way of coping with otherwise intolerable life situations. The Nazi death camps fall into a long history of Jewish persecution. Early in their history, Jews learned to laugh at themselves, perhaps to keep from crying over situations they were powerless to change. The enduring paradox of Jewish joking is the contrast between divine election—a covenanted people, a Chosen People—and worldly misery: in Wisse's words, "a chosen people repeatedly devastated by history." As a well-known joke among East European Jews put it, "Thou hast chosen us from among all the peoples; why did you have to pick on us?"

Ruth Wisse is an academic, not an entertainer. Her book struggles to understand rather than to defend Jewish humor in the face of tragedy. She takes seriously the Ecclesiastes statement on timing and seasons. The time to weep and time to laugh might call for a time to refrain from laughing. She asks, "Should Jews be proud of the fact that they were well on their way to making up 75 percent of American comedy professionals at a time when the Jews of Europe were being murdered en masse?" Wisse writes, "Jewish comedy must go where the Jews go." This includes—for example—the

destruction, during the Holocaust, of ninety-two percent of Polish Jews, the biological and cultural center of the Jewish world of that time. Nevertheless, the witticism that stands at the heart of this book was recorded in Yiddish in the Warsaw Ghetto: "God forbid that this war should last as long as we are able to endure it."

In 1957 the TV personality actor Steve Allen presented his philosophy of comedy: "When I explained to a friend recently that the subject matter of most comedy is tragic (drunkenness, overweight, financial problems, accidents, etc.) he said, 'Do you mean to tell me that the dreadful events of the day are a fit subject for humorous comment?' The answer is 'No, but they will be pretty soon.' . . . I guess you can make a mathematical formula out of it. *Tragedy plus time equals comedy.*"

A Jewish tailor measured his friend for a new pair of trousers. Periodically the friend called to inquire of the progress, and he was always told that they will be ready soon. After awhile he stopped calling. Out of the blue, seven years later, he got a call from his tailor friend with the news that he could now pick up his new trousers. In exasperation, he declared, "God only took seven days to create the world!" The tailor replied, "Yes, but look at the world, and then take a look at these trousers."

***Does God have a sense of humor?*** The late comedian Grady Nutt used to insist that God has a sense of humor. He usually followed the statement with a suggestion, "Go look in the mirror." A few years ago, I was approached by Sandy Smith, our local humorist as well as a popular motivation speaker in business circles. Sandy and Carolyn were in seminary classes together, and he was at one time a minister in a church here. Sandy was asked to preach, and he wanted to know if I could help him to find Scripture to verify that Jesus laughed. I immediately thought of the shortest verse of the Bible "Jesus wept," but I could not point him immediately to a proof text that Jesus had a good sense of humor. A few months later I encountered an article in *Christian Century* (August 9, 2003) by David Heim, "A Joking Matter: And Jesus Laughed." Actually Heim did no better than I did at finding the proof text for Jesus as a comedy act, but he did find significance in the biblical picture of laughter as good medicine when dealing with the absurdities of life. He cites Ted Cohen on the peculiar capacity of jokes to absorb absurdity as theologically significant. To laugh at the world's absurdities implies an acceptance of incomprehensibility, and this acceptance is a kind of religious affirmation. Such jokes offer a way of being reconciled to the creation and the Creator even as one expresses anger or despair at God's world.

One of my early experiences in ministry was serving a growing suburban Houston church as youth minister during the summers of my junior and senior years at Baylor. The experience was highly educational in my preparation for the next half-century in pastoral ministry. I recall a complaint leveled at the pastor. He engaged in too much levity in the pulpit. I learned later to identify this attitude as a leftover from the Puritan days of early America. Our forebears in faith took matters of faith so seriously that they forgot how to laugh, and I suspect that many of the atrocities that grew out of that movement, like the Salem Witch Trials, was a direct effect of an over-serious view of life. Most of the time, we miss the humor in the Bible and even in the church because we get absorbed by the heavy side of faith.

***Is laughter the best medicine for your faith as well as your health?*** You may have noticed, "Laughter in your life" is among the elements of good health cited by Dr. Bob as he signs off "The Dr. Bob Show" on our local PBS affiliate. According to an article in *Psychology Today* (June 21, 2005) at this year's meeting of the American College of Cardiology, Dr. Michael Miller reported a study of twenty healthy people the discovery that laughter did as much good for their arteries as aerobic activity. *The New York Times* (Dec 20, 2013) cites an alternative view recently published in the *British Medical Journal*. "The force of laughing can dislocate jaws, prompt asthma attacks, cause headaches, make hernias protrude." But the *Journal* also assessed the benefit side of the question and concluded that laughter's benefits included reduced anger, anxiety and stress, reduced cardiovascular tension, blood glucose concentration and risk of myocardial infarction.

But what about our life of faith? I would suggest that laughing together is as important as praying together in church. Shared jokes and fun, like shared food and drink, are akin to the heavy emotions of empathy with the pain of others and involvement in their grief. When you look back over the whole of life like Abraham and Sarah, you will remember the good times and the bad and find that the

mixture of grief and joy is the reality that we experience in our walk with God and with one another. That does not mean that everything in life is funny or that laughter is always appropriate; but people of faith, like Abraham and Sarah, find the strength to endure by refusing to allow the darkness of tragedy to overwhelm them. Laughing at God eventually becomes laughing with God at the unfolding drama of a life worth living.