



## “Faith is a Laughing Matter”

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*Genesis 18:1-15*

Our Chair of Deacons, David Doom, gave my family a going away gift when we finally moved out of his house last October. While staying with him, our girls delighted in asking his Amazon Echo all sorts of crazy questions like “How big is the sun,” or “How much does a giraffe weigh?” So, on our departure, David gave us our very own Echo. Aside from Amanda’s coffee pot, our Echo is the most used appliance in our home. Our girls love to ask it questions, request songs, and get the weather report. But, their favorite thing to ask the Echo to do is tell a joke. “Alexa, tell me a joke,” they say, and the Echo quickly supplies the girls with giggles.

Some of our current favorite Alexa jokes include:

What’s an astronaut’s favorite sandwich ingredient? Launch meat.

How much do dead batteries cost? Nothing they’re free of charge.

Knock, knock. Who’s there? Isabell. Isabell who? Isabell not working? I rang four times before I started knocking.

We laugh (or groan) when we hear a joke. We laugh when we are around good friends. We laugh when something feels uncomfortable, or when we don’t know what to say. There is happy laughter of children at play and humble laughter when we laugh at our own imperfections. There is empty laughter when we try to mask our loneliness and barrenness. There is evil laughter. There is joyful laughter. There is inappropriate laughter. And in today’s text we see that faith is a laughing matter when Abraham shares hospitality with three visitors. Disbelief is also a laughing matter when ninety-year-old Sarah is told she will have a child.

The scripture begins with Abraham resting at the entrance of his tent beneath the oaks of Mamre. These trees were not the big, stately oaks we think of here in North Texas. They were medium-sized flowering trees – probably something more like a Crape Myrtle. And this place, Mamre, was where Abram built an altar to the Lord after their covenant was renewed. There is also a legend, cited by Josephus, the first century Roman Jewish scholar and historian, that the oaks at Mamre were as old as the world itself. So, what happened under and around the oaks of Mamre happened in a holy place. And we can feel in the Scripture reading for this morning that something special is about to happen again.

Abraham was ninety-nine-years-old and, together with Ishmael and all the men of his household, had just been circumcised. As with anyone who had just gone through a very delicate surgery at such an old age, Abraham was in a reclining posture at the entrance of his tent underneath the shady oaks. In the midst of the heat of the day, when it would be extremely strange for anyone to be wandering, three travelers appeared. We might be curious when reading this passage as to

why Abraham was so eager to greet these strangers. He was reclining at the entrance of his tent, shaded from the sun, hot and hurting, and likely pondering how God would ever keep God's promise to make Sarah and him the parents of a great nation. Maybe Abraham needed a good word. Maybe he needed to find joy, to find laughter, to find faith. Abraham needed a message from God. So, when the visitors suddenly appeared, Abraham leaped to his feet and ran to the messengers. Perhaps his leaping to his feet and running in the heat of the day was motivated by anticipation for some hopeful word or some small piece of faith in how God proposed to make good on the divine promise of a son with Sarah. Abraham was searching for the laughter of faith. But, even with his doubts and worries, Abraham eagerly extended gracious hospitality.

Hospitality in the Ancient Near East was held in high value. Helping and assisting the stranger was part of the culture of the day. Hebrew Bible historian, Thomas Bolin argues that by showing hospitality, the host showed 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 the possibility of violent conflict. Yet, Bolin also points out that the function of this host-guest relationship in the Abraham story is flipped on its head when the guest takes the form of the "divine visitor." The dominant role of the host is subverted by the divine nature of the guest, which leads to a moment of revelation, mutuality, and faith.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham's infirmed state and increased age did not prevent him from extending lavish hospitality. In the unedited version of this morning's text we are told about the acts of hospitality Abraham showed his guests - the washing of feet, rest, freshly baked cakes, a roasted calf, curds, and milk. Abraham made sure that these guests were welcomed with utmost respect and regard. Then, as this great gesture of hospitality reached a crescendo, the travelers spoke. They asked where Sarah was, seeming to know her name and relation, without even meeting her. Abraham had lingered close to the guests, staying by their side and they were all outside while Sarah remained in the tent preparing the food and drink. The words came forth about Sarah's location and this gathering of guests quickly became a visitation from the Lord. The verbs shifted from plural to singular, as one of the guests stated that next year, when this visitor wandered through again, Sarah would have a child. Sarah, who was ninety-years-old, rightly so, laughed to herself with sadness and disbelief at something as foolish as this proclamation of birth.

Sarah laughed to herself, or literally Sarah laughed in her gut or belly. The phrase suggests less that Sarah laughed quietly out of earshot, and more that she had a great, big belly laugh at God. She laughed at the promises that God kept making and not fulfilling. The Hebrew term for gut or belly refers to a person's abdomen and the phrase could also potentially be translated "laughed in her womb."<sup>2</sup> This was a painful reminder that Sarah's womb was empty. We feel in Sarah's belly laugh the agonizing laugh of one who had hoped for a child, but grown too old to conceive.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Gen 25:22

Frederick Buechner believes that being in communion with God begins with a woman laughing. He says, “She is an old woman, and after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and ruttled like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts to shake. She squinnies her eyes shut, and her laughter is all China teeth and wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing ninety-one hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby. Even though it was an angel who told her, she can't control herself, and her husband can't control himself, either. He keeps a straight face a few seconds longer than she does, but he ends up cracking up, too.

The old woman's name is Sarah, of course, and the old man's name is Abraham, and they are laughing at the idea of a baby being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare picking up the tab. 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. They are laughing at God and with God, and they are laughing at themselves too, because laughter has that in common with weeping. No matter what the immediate occasion is of either your laughter or your tears, the object of both ends up being yourself and your own life.<sup>3</sup>

We, like Sarah, laugh and cry in disbelief, in sadness, and in doubt. But, God visits us in our laughter and tears. God didn't chastise Sarah for her laughter. God acknowledged her disbelief. God would not let her shrink from the honest emotions of hurt and doubt. God saw through her lie of “I did not laugh” with the simple truth, “Yes, you did laugh.” In a way, maybe what God was saying to Sarah was, “I know it's hard to believe what I have 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.”

We laugh as Sarah laughed, not because we have faith, but because we find it impossible at times to have faith. Abraham and Sarah laughed because they had reached a dead end in their lives and because they had adjusted to it. They had accepted their hopelessness. And if we're honest, we too adapt ourselves to all those barren places in our lives rather than believe that nothing is too extraordinary or too impossible for God.

We should take comfort in knowing that our own doubts and denials, the lies we tell ourselves to rationalize our disbelief, and the times that we scoff at the likelihood of divine intervention in our lives, these are the raw materials of God's redemption and salvation. We should take comfort that our laughter of disbelief is countered by the voice of God, speaking into our emptiness and barrenness, saying “Nothing is impossible.”

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<sup>3</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Telling the Truth*, 49.

We need to confront that single question of the visiting Lord each and every day. Is there anything too hard for God? Is there anything so difficult that God is not with us, accompanying us, loving us, laughing with us, and sharing hospitality? Is anything too hard for God? Sarah had her baby, as the stranger foretold. She named him Isaac, which means “he laughs.” Sarah’s laughter lost its cynical edge, and became the laughter of joy. Is anything too hard for God? Like Sarah, we have suffered crushing disappointments. Like Sarah, we have waited for blessings that seem always just beyond reach. Like Sarah, we are prone to cynicism. Like Sarah, we are prone to despair. Like Sarah we laugh the laugh of disbelief. Is anything too hard for God? We seem to be mired in political pessimism, ravaged by institutional racism, mistreated by the powerful. We laugh in disbelief at the state of our world. We are drowning in debt, we are wrecked by broken relationships, and we mourn and grieve as loved ones suffer. We call out in our doubt, “Is anything too hard for God?”

Ask this question. Own this question. This question matters. This question is the moment where the human and the divine meet in mutual hospitality and care. It’s this question that causes us to belly laugh. It’s this question that echoes in all our places of doubt and disbelief when we wonder at the promises of God. When we ask this question, God draws near to us and accompanies us. Is anything too hard for God?

Faith is definitely a laughing matter, whether we laugh in the joy of belief or we laugh in the pain of disbelief. And in our laughter, we are reminded time and time again that the God of Abraham and Sarah is with us. The God of Abraham and Sarah will not fail or forsake us. The God of Abraham and Sarah will return to us and keep promises made to us. The God of Abraham and Sarah reminds us in the messiness of our faith and in the barrenness of our lives, nothing is too hard for God.

Amen.