

WHY DO WE LAUGH?

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

We have good reasons for joy.

A sermon preached by
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I used to start nearly every sermon I preached with a joke. I called it the Toastmaster approach. Start ‘em off laughing, and they will pay attention, at least for a little. But as I go back through my old sermons, I must repent for some of the lame and irrelevant humor I inflicted on my congregations. Over the years, my preaching has evolved, perhaps even improved. As I continued my education, I read professors of preaching who counseled against the inappropriate use of humor. And, to tell you the truth, the old ways just didn’t seem to work anymore. The world is not as funny as it used to be. Our challenges got more serious. It seemed that laughter was harder and harder to come by.

I am not about to advocate for the return of lame jokes in sermons. That ship has sailed, I hope, forever. But I do think we need to recapture our spirit of joy. It is as important as ever, perhaps more important than ever, not to take things too seriously. We need to laugh and be lighthearted, even in the face of the challenges that are in front of us. To laugh at life simply means we acknowledge that God is in control, and everything is going to be OK eventually. As Nehemiah said to the people of Israel, when they were struggling, trying to resurrect Jerusalem from destruction, “*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*”¹ And it is.

One of the most prevalent questions in our culture today is, “What brings you joy?” Do a google search for that, and you can read for days. Universities ask students to answer that question on their admission application: “What brings you joy?” Personal organizers use that question as a principle for cleaning out your closets: “If it doesn’t bring you joy, throw it away.”

Kate Snowise, a psychologist and life coach, has four questions that help us claim our joy. This first is “What do you love?” Make a list of things that you enjoy, from sunsets to ice cream, whatever brings a smile to your face. Then ask, “What did I do in my spare time when I was a child?” Think back to the games you played, the hobbies you enjoyed, the fun you had, the things that made you happy. Then ask, “What am I curious about? What would I like to learn more about or try doing that’s new?” Maybe there’s some joy we haven’t discovered yet. And finally, ask, “What would my Dream Day look like?” If I was away from all the pressures and limits of my daily life, and money and time were no

object, what would I do? Those are great questions, right? I can see the smiles on your faces already.²

So let's do an exercise in joy. Turn to someone sitting next to or close to you and answer the question, "What brings you joy?"

The story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming the strangers and receiving the prediction of the birth of Isaac is the first time that laughter is mentioned in the Bible. It is an important story that echoes all the way into the New Testament. In this story, we can see, even today, our reasons for joy.

The book of Genesis is composed from several different ancient sources, and sometimes stories get told twice, like the creation story. There is a prequel to chapter 18 in chapter 17, where God also tells Abraham about the son he will have. Abraham is 99 years old, and God promises him (again!) multitudes of descendants and vast territory. But there's a catch: as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, Abraham and all his male descendants will have to be circumcised. After this painful bit of news, God tells Abraham that Sarah, his 90-year-old wife, will have a son. This didn't just make Abraham smile or chuckle; he fell out laughing. Genesis says, "*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?'*"³ This was the funniest thing Abraham had ever heard. He didn't believe a word of it.

Fast forward to chapter 18. Abraham is sitting under the trees, and the Lord comes to him again, this time in the form of three men. Christian interpreters have loved to see the Trinity in these visitors, but that may be going a little further than the original author intended. Nevertheless, the three men represented the Lord. Abraham got busy preparing a hospitable meal for the visitors. There are echoes of this in the New Testament, where the Letter to the Hebrews says to be hospitable to strangers, because by doing so, some had entertained angels without knowing it.⁴ Like Abraham, right?

After dinner, the visitors asked where Sarah was. She was in the tent listening. The Lord said, "*I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.*"⁵ Now it was Sarah's turn to laugh. She was way past child-bearing years, not to mention Abraham being older than she was. She couldn't help herself; she laughed. And the Lord called her out: "Why did you laugh? Is anything impossible for God? I will come back around, and you will have a son!"

Sarah was so scared and embarrassed, she tried to backpedal: "I didn't laugh." But this was the Lord she was talking to, and he said, "Oh, yes, you did." You don't argue long with the Lord.

The echoes of this story come in the first chapter of Luke. Again, the angel of the Lord announced that an old woman, Elizabeth, who never had children, would finally bear a child. This time the husband, Zechariah, scoffed. And the angel took his voice away. Then another unlikely mother, a virgin named Mary, was told she would have a baby with God. But her response was one of faith: "*Let it be with me according to your word.*"⁶ That word of faith changed the course of history.

Eventually, Abraham and Sarah's laughter of disbelief turned into the laughter of joy. In a few months, Sarah discovered she was pregnant. Amazingly, her 90-year-old body brought forth a healthy baby boy. Abraham, now at the century mark, circumcised his son,

and they named him Isaac, which means “Laughter.” Sarah said, “*God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.*”⁷

Finally, the question the Lord had posed in Genesis 18 was answered. “Is anything impossible for God?” I guess not. Look at the proud parents who had just defied the laws of biology!

Jesus asked and answered the same question centuries later. After the unfortunate incident with the rich young ruler turning away from Jesus, not being willing to give up his wealth, Jesus made a remark that it was exceedingly difficult for rich people to go to heaven. The disciples anxiously asked, “*Then who can be saved?*” (Although they themselves were not rich.) And Jesus said, “*For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.*”⁸ Later, Jesus extended the possibility to all who believe, saying to his disciples, “*Nothing will be impossible for you.*”⁹

What do we see in this wonderful little story that gives us joy? What reasons do we have to be happy? Why do we laugh, in spite of it all?

We laugh because God comes to us. We are not on our own. God is with us. God comes to us in our times of need. God came to Abraham in the three visitors that showed up at his tent. Throughout the Biblical story, God showed up. God appeared to Jacob, then wrestled him by the river. God came to Moses in a burning bush, clouds by day, fire by night, and a meeting on Mt. Sinai. God came to Isaiah in a vision in the temple and then gave him the sign of Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” Finally and ultimately, God came to us in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, dwelling among us, showing us the glory of the Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.¹⁰

The presence of God is an antidote to our loneliness. Just a few weeks ago, the surgeon general of the United States issued a renewed warning about the epidemic of loneliness afflicting our country. Dr. Vivek Murthy reported that about half of American adults experience loneliness. The health effects are quantifiable, in terms of stroke, heart disease, depression, anxiety, dementia, and shorter life expectancy. People don’t engage with houses of worship, clubs, community organizations, or even families the way they used to, and the effects of loneliness are as bad for you as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness has spiked among young people ages 15-24, and is increased by the use of social media in excessive amounts.¹¹ People are lonely.

We have the antidote to loneliness. God is with us. We are never alone. We have a church, a community of faith where people can be loved and accepted, nurtured and valued. In fact, if we look, we can see God all around us. Every person we meet is a beloved creation of our heavenly Father, and whenever we offer hospitality and relationship and love to anyone else, we are entertaining angels, as Hebrews says. We are welcoming God, so God can welcome us.

The second reason we laugh is because God surprises us. Things don’t always go as expected. Sometimes things work out better than we ever thought they could. Imagine being promised an abundance of descendants, yet not having an heir. I’m sure Abraham was scratching his head. Then your 90-year-old wife gets pregnant! There’s a surprise for you! God pulled this surprise several times in Scripture, not only with Sarah, but also with Hannah and Elizabeth. God is in the business of making miracles happen.

This last Memorial Day I posted about my cousin Greg, who was killed in Vietnam in 1968. He was only 20 years old. He made the ultimate sacrifice for his country. His family was devastated. I was 11 years old, and it was the first time I had ever seen abject,

uncontrolled sorrow—screaming, crying, bedfast grief. I didn't know how they could ever get past this. But then, maybe a year later, my aunt, who was in her forties, had a big surprise. She was pregnant. She gave birth to a precious baby boy named Ross, the youngest cousin by far. He was so cute, and everybody enjoyed him, and laughter returned to that home. He didn't take away the loss of his older brother, but he brought healing and joy where there had been nothing but grief.

Where is God surprising you? What is turning out better than you imagined? Do you think that's by accident? I feel like I quote this Scripture every other week, and maybe I do, but it's my go-to verse in life: "*In all things God works for good with those who love him and are called according to his purpose.*"¹² Don't be surprised when you are surprised by God; it's what God does, and always has.

The third thing that makes us laugh is the way God blesses us. God comes to us; God surprises us; and God blesses us. God is faithful to the promise of life and love and grace and peace and joy. Sometimes it may seem like a long time coming, but God always blesses us in the end. The fulfillment of the promise for Abraham was no quick fix. He was a young pup of 75 when God first promised to make a great nation out of his descendants. A few years later, God renewed the promise, but still gave Abraham no heir. When he was 86, in desperation Sarah gave her servant girl Hagar to Abraham, and his son Ishmael was born. (That's a whole different story.) But it was 25 years before the heir that God promised was born to Abraham and Sarah, and Laughter (Isaac) came into their lives. The blessing may take longer than we want or wish or hope, but God is always faithful to the promise.

In his book, *The Names of God's Promises*, Pastor Mark Tabb writes, "The message of promise is the beginning and end of everything that is included in the Bible. It undergirds every word, sometimes openly, sometimes subtly, but it is always there. God's promises are the common thread that unites the Old and New Testament, the core that makes sixty-six books into one."¹³

The ultimate promise that God fulfills is the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is Emmanuel, God with us. What a surprise, that after the failure of the Law and the Prophets to bring redemption and righteousness to the planet, God would take on flesh, be born as a human, live a human life, suffer and die on the cross. What a surprise that God would raise Jesus from the dead, and through the resurrection defeat evil, death, and sin forever. This is the promise of redemption, although we are still waiting for the world to look more redeemed. It will come. The promise will be fulfilled. The kingdom of God will come again on earth; creation will be restored; God and God's people will reign in eternal glory. That is a promise that brings us joy!

Let's be honest. Sometimes life is no laughing matter. But faith is. It's not lame to laugh at life, because God is God, and this whole enterprise belongs to God. So laugh! It's good for you. The scientists tell us, laughter releases all those good chemicals in your brain. It lowers your blood pressure. It spreads contagiously to other people. It builds relationships.

And it's justified. We have good reasons for joy. God comes to us. God surprises us. God blesses us. So just praise God and laugh!

¹ Nehemiah 8:10.

² <https://heretothrive.com/4-questions-to-help-you-identify-the-things-you-love/>.

³ Genesis 17:17.

⁴ Hebrews 13:2.

⁵ Genesis 18:10.

⁶ Luke 1:38.

⁷ Genesis 21:6.

⁸ Mark 10:27.

⁹ Matthew 17:20.

¹⁰ John 1:14.

¹¹ Amanda Seitz, "Loneliness an epidemic, surgeon general asserts," *NW Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, May 3, 2023. <https://nwa.pressreader.com/article/281586654923638>

¹² Romans 8:28.

¹³ Mark Tabb, *The Names of God's Promises* (Moody Press, 1998).