

## “Who Has the Last Laugh Now?”

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

Today, after a little break, we pick up our journey through Genesis with a little bit more from Abraham and Sarah’s story. If we remember the last time, we encountered Abraham and Sarah, they had just set out on a journey to some unknown land all because God had called them to do so. They set out on this journey at the ripe old age of 75, all because God had promised to make a great nation through them. All because God had told them that through them, all the families of the Earth would be blessed.

Now as we read today’s Scripture, we see that they have temporarily settled down in this unknown land and are just waiting for something to happen. That something comes in the form of a visit from three visitors, who we come to find out later are complete strangers or so we think. We’ve already been told that the Lord appeared to Abraham in the very first line of this text so if we put two and two together...we should know that there is something special about these three visitors. Having them stop by is not just a coincidence. Something big is about to happen!

The visitors begin making their way to Abraham and the next thing we know, Abraham is pulling out all the stops to welcome them. He is killing the fattest calf. He is telling Sarah to make some bread. He is running around, gathering up everything he can think of to pull together a really elaborate feast. No fast food containers here. This meal is the real deal.

As readers, we all assume that Abraham is doing all of this because well, it is God visiting and maybe just maybe Abraham is trying to impress God just a bit.. But interestingly enough as we continue to read the text, we can't be sure that Abraham even knows that it is God visiting. It really does seem like Abraham sees these strangers coming towards his tent and he goes to greet them in a most gracious way. And if truth be told, Abraham's radical welcome was not really unusual during that time. His gathering of things to make up a feast was what was culturally expected of him when he had unexpected visitors. During that time, it was just what people did when they had guest stop by. As a rule of thumb, one was always ready to welcome strangers because one never knew when he would be entertaining angels. So in welcoming his guests so extravagantly, Abraham was just being a good host.

In fact, to add a little more context to our situation, there is even some question to the why behind Abraham's motives in welcoming his guests in a way that could be seen as so over the top. A few biblical scholars believe that

Abraham was showing such radical hospitality to the guests as a way to try and defuse the possibility of violence. Usually a show of gracious and radical hospitality by the host was a way for the host to show dominance over the guest. Radical hospitality was a way to get the guest to peacefully conform to the community. Abraham could have been doing all this, sharing such a gracious welcome simply because he was trying to defuse a potentially sticky situation.

So if there is more to this text than just Abraham's example of radical hospitality, what is exactly going on in this text? As we should know by now, when God shows up, surprising things happen. The same can be said for this story as well. God shows up and turns things upside down!

As readers, our first clue to this can be found in verse 9: "They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent."

Now let me just say, that if some stranger shows up and starts asking where the wife is, my first hope is that the husband doesn't say, "Well, she is standing right over there!" Hopefully, the husband would at least try to figure out the situation first before he brings in his wife, especially if it could be a potential dangerous one. But as we have also learned, sometimes the stories of our faith foundation show us great examples of faith but the people in these stories are not the brightest bulbs in the box if you know what I'm saying.

Does anyone else find it surprising that Abraham doesn't question the stranger who is asking where Sarah is? There is no way this stranger could have known Sarah. We aren't told that Sarah came out of the tent and welcomed the strangers with Abraham. In fact, we are told Sarah is overhearing this conversation between Abraham and the strangers while she is still in the tent.

This story takes an even weirder turn when we are told that the stranger overhears Sarah laugh in response to the news that she was going to have a child next year at this time. The strangest part is that Sarah doesn't laugh out loud like a good belly laugh. She laughs to herself. Literally, the text says she laughs in her womb. Yet the stranger overhears this.

Once again, let me stop right here and give everyone a biology lesson. We already know that Sarah is old. She was old when she started out on this crazy journey. We've also been told that she no longer has the parts in good working order that she needs to have in good working order to have a baby. So, yeah, she laughs when she hears the news that she is going to have a baby in a year. Wouldn't you? I know I would. I would probably be rolling on the floor at this point if I was Sarah. It wouldn't just be the stranger overhearing me laugh. Everybody all around would hear me laughing at such as absurd idea, especially if I knew the biological possibilities of that happening were slim to none.

Once again...we need to remember when God shows up, surprising things can and do happen.

The stranger asks the question that is on everyone's mind after he hears Sarah laugh. "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? That question about sums it up doesn't it? It is the question we as people find ourselves asking all the time when it comes to our faith, to our understanding of God. It is the question we find ourselves asking when the darkness becomes too much and it seems like all hope is lost. This question that asks if anything is too wonderful for our Lord "echoes in all places of doubt and disbelief" as we think about the promises of God.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Sort of leaves things hanging, doesn't it? So we read on to see what exactly happens to Abraham and Sarah.

What I love about this text is the ending. For years, I have heard sermon after sermon telling me that God reprimands Sarah for not believing. That God scolds her because she doubted God's word. And I'll be honest, I have struggled to put that image of a scolding God together with the God that I knew and had experienced in my life, a God of love, a God of hope, a God of grace, a God who shows up and does the unexpected when all hope is lost.

That is until this year...I came across a blog that took a different look at this familiar text. It asked the question what if. What if, instead of scolding Sarah, God

was in fact inviting her to wait and see? This blog suggested that instead of reprimanding Sarah for her laughter, God was acknowledging her disbelief while at the same time proclaiming the promise and the hope. “Maybe God was saying to Sarah that “I know it’s hard to believe in what I promised. Everything about this notion, [about you having a child when biologically it doesn’t seem possible], everything about this notion seems topsy-turvy to the ways of the world. Sarah, you did laugh, but that’s okay. You’re not the first, nor will you be the last to laugh at what seems impossible. But that doesn’t mean it can’t happen.” That doesn’t mean it won’t happen.

God’s promises, God’s word reminds us over and over again that just because we struggle to gasp the new life offered, just because we laugh at absurd ideas like new life after the darkness seems to win, laugh at the idea that love triumphs over hate. We laugh at ideas like how people can come together and in spite of their differences work together for a common purpose, just because we laugh at these absurd ideas doesn’t mean that anything is too impossible for our God. That doesn’t mean it can’t or won’t happen.

You see the thing we tend to forget is that a lot of how we live out our faith depends on how we answer the question: Is anything too impossible for our God? Let me say that again: a lot of how we live out our faith depends on how we answer this question of “Is anything too impossible for our God?”

Here's why I say that: If we say yes, if we say yes that there are some things that are too impossible for our God, then...well all bets are off. Why are we gathering here as a community of faith in the first place? I'm not sure I really want to worship, to be in relationship with a God who is fickle, who is limited, on whom I may or may not be able to rely. I'm know that I cannot find life giving hope in a God that allows the tomb to be the last word.

However, if we answer no to the question "Is anything too impossible for our God, if our answer is no to this question, then we need to step up our game. If we truly say, and if we truly believe that nothing is too impossible for our God, then we need to put our money where our mouth is. God has given us the promises of grace. God has given us the promises of hope. God has given us the promises of healing and wholeness. Now is the time to start living as people of faith who believe in them, who trust in the completely. Now is the time to really start living as the Body of Christ in this messy, broken world, as people who know, deep in our hearts that God's promise of new life is real.

As I have lived with this text this past week, I have wondered about this a lot. I have wondered why it is so difficult for us to believe in or to even have hope in God's promises of new life. And I think it all comes back to Abraham's notion of welcome.

Let me explain: You see, Abraham greeted the guests long before they could come near his house. He welcomed them and showed them hospitality to possibly defuse a potentially sticky situation. But as I have thought of his welcome, I realized that he only let the guests in so far. He allowed them to come in on his turf only so far. He never really truly welcomed them into his home, into his life. Abraham never really welcomed them in to be in relationship with him. He welcomed them in so far and then no farther.

So knowing what we know about these guests, don't you find it interesting that Abraham couldn't or wouldn't fully receive the strangers as guests in his home just in case, just for the possibility sake that he might be entertaining angels, that he might be welcoming God into his home? Because if Abraham had really done that, if he had fully welcomed God into his home, into his life, that would have meant accepting God for who God is, a God who doesn't play by our rules, a God who shakes things up, a God who surprises us at every turn.

I don't think Abraham was ready to welcome God fully, not yet at least. I don't think Abraham fully understood, fully comprehended what it meant to be in relationship with God. Because you see, if he understood that, he would have shared with Sarah what he already knew. Just a few verses before this story, God had already told Abraham about the promise of the child but Abraham doesn't even bother to share this life-changing news with Sarah. Instead, he lets her

continue to live in the darkness. Instead Abraham allows Sarah to continue to live in despair and brokenness. Instead, Abraham would rather keep this life giving news to himself than bring hope, than share grace with someone who so desperately needs to know that there is new life after the darkness.

Abraham could have healed some of Sarah's brokenness if he had just believed, he had just trusted in the promises of God. But to do that, in order for Abraham to believe in God's promises, in order for Abraham to trust in God's promises, he would have had to accept God for who God really is. A God who doesn't play by our rules, a God who laughs at our attempts to control every situation, a God who still working, in spite of this crazy mixed up messy world, a God who is still working in spite of our reluctance to share the good news of God's grace and love with all of God's people, with all of God's creation. In spite of our reluctance to relieve a little brokenness found in this world just by sharing words of hope and love that yes, we take for granted too many times, in spite of all that, God is still working to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's people.

In order to believe and to trust in God's promises, Abraham and yes, us as modern day people of faith would need to accept God fully, would need to accept God for who God really is, a God who has the last laugh!

You see, the thing we always seem to forget is that the Lord did as God had promised. The Lord does as God has promised. The Lord will do as God has promised. It may not be on our time. It may not be what we expected but God is always there meeting us, loving us, guiding us when it seems like all hope is lost.

So yes, Sarah may have laughed but guess who has the last laugh when these promises of new life, these promises of hope, when these promises of wholeness really do come true? Sarah gave birth to a son. She named him Isaac which means he laughs.

But this time the laugh is not from disbelief or uncomfortable nervous tension. This time, the last laugh rings out in joy. Rings out in happiness. This time, the last laugh rings out in wonder and amazement because this laugh is a sign for all the world to see, for all the world to understand that God does as God promises. Thanks be to God! Amen.