God Get's the Last Laugh

Genesis 21:1-7

THE FALLS CHURCH ANGLICAN
March 19, 2023

THE COLLECT OF THE DAY

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen
(The Fourth Sunday in Lent)

SERMON OUTLINE

In Genesis 17 and 18, we witness a sequence of events that turn Abraham's world upside down - he is promised a son through his wife Sarah, despite their advanced age. Abraham initially responds by attempting to "mitigate the miraculous" and suggest that God's plan would be better served through his already existing son, Ishmael. As we delve deeper into these stories, we'll explore how human beings often struggle to welcome the absurd, and how the boundaries of reason stop short of the infinite wonders of divine revelation.

Abraham Laughs

I. God expands the promise to Abraham (Gen. 17:15-21)
- God expands the promise to Abraham of becoming a great nation, to becoming "a multitude of nations" and having kings come from him.
- God intensifies the promises by revealing himself as "God Almighty" and changing Abram's name to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude". The covenant is also intensified in terms of its duration and God's presence.
- Abraham hears Sarah's promise of a son in her old age, which he initially finds too bizarre to be believable. He attempts to offer Ishmael as an alternative, rather than taking a true leap of faith.

Sarah Laughs

II. The Extravagance of the pronouncement (Gen. 18:1-15)
- In verses 1-4, we learn that "the LORD" appeared to Abraham through three messengers.
- Abraham invites them to have a "morsel of bread." He then proceeds, however, in verses 6-8 to prepare three seahs (about six gallons) worth of "the best wheat flour" along with a choice calf.
- This is an extravagant meal for only three people. The extravagance of the meal indicates that something momentous is about to occur.
- What's more: "the best wheat flour" and "choice calf" are two common elements offered in sacrificial rituals to God throughout the Old Testament.
- Abraham brings more than a morsel, and he does so because the dinner guest is God.
- Scripture says: "And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him."
- Like Abraham, Sarah laughs.
  - When God calls her on it, she denies it in verse 15 "saying, 'I did not laugh,' for she was afraid."
  - In speaking the word "laugh" even in her denial, Sarah inadvertently pronounces the future name of her son, Isaac . She literally says "I didn't Isaac [laugh]!" To which the Lord says, "No, but you did Isaac [laugh]."

God Gets the Last Laugh

III. God Gets the Last Laugh (Gen. 21:1-7)
- Now, "laughter" himself is born, in the son of promise, Isaac
- Sarah's exclamation in verse 6 is really an invitation to us all: "all who hear of this will laugh with me."

- Abraham laughs at ridiculousness beyond the bounds of reason.
  - Sarah laughs at absurdity beyond the bounds of hope.
  - And we laugh—whether out of astonishment, or absurdity, or joy—when we come to the mystery of the Gospel that defies the bounds of our reason.
- Listen at the door of the Word. Laugh in astonishment. Leap.
- When you embrace a Gospel that defies your expectations, you will be embraced by a God who eternally exceeds your expectations.
- The leap of faith is not a leap into the empty void; it's nothing less than a leap into the arms of Almighty God.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Abraham tried to reorganize the ridiculous to fit within the bounds of human reason. He tried to trade the leap of faith with the hop of faith, hooked up to a harness of human reason. What constraints are you bringing to God's call on your life through his Word? Where are you holding back? What are your harnesses?

- When Sarah steps away from the door of the tent we wonder what it will be like for her to step into the emotionally vulnerable place of unexpected motherhood? What will we do when the fear of vulnerability, change, or other emotions threaten to keep us from full surrender?

- What ways can scripture, community, prayer, and worship help us resist the reality that 'most ruts are comfortable ruts' to press on to what God has for us in the present and future?

- How do you interpret the scriptural gospel verse "I believe! Help my unbelief!"? How does the verse relate to the limits of reason, the reality of sin on the way we know (and what we know), and the necessity of the Holy Spirit in coming to and nurturing faith?

> ***The gospel cannot be reorganized to fit our understanding of reason because faith requires a leap beyond reason. We must be willing to seek understanding, fall to our face, and laugh out loud to truly believe. Faith requires more, not less than reason, and revelation exceeds the bounds of reason's limits. To take the leap of faith, we must let go of our reliance on reason and trust in the power of the gospel.***

- Thirteen years is a long time. Where were you thirteen years ago? Were you a believer. Reflect on God's miraculous grace and faithfulness to you in the past thirteen years, and think of ways that you can ensure that the next thirteen years are characterized by a faith that leaps rather than hops.

PRAYER

Lord, we look at Your revelation. And in one sense, we're amazed, but depending on the day, we might want to domesticate it. Depending on the day, we might want to temper it so that it behaves itself a little bit more within the bounds of our control because, quite frankly, we're scared. We're afraid to go all in. But You call us not to remain stagnant in the status quo of spirituality that's harnessed to a faith that we control, but You call us to leap into Your arms by the power that You provide as El Shaddai. Almighty God—the power that brings miracles, the power that keeps promises. And so we pray that You give us faith that is like a symphony. Give us faith that is like beautiful music that, when it first comes out in the world, is considered ridiculous, but actually is a masterpiece. Give us faith that looks with the wide eyes of a child at a God who is endless, and says, 'I trust You. Help me, I'm all in.' We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Further Study

- The name El Shaddai is used only five times in Holy Scripture and it always appears in contexts where God promises descendants his people and expresses his power to keep that promise.
- Genesis 35:11 "And God said to Jacob, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body." Cf. Gen. 28:3
- In Gen 12:2 Abraham will become a 'great nation'.
- By the time we get to Genesis 17 Abraham is no longer just a nation; he will be "a multitude of nations" (verses 4-5) and "kings shall come" from him (verses 6 and again in verse 16).
- Second, Gen. 17:5 is where God officially changes the patriarch's name from Abram (which means "exalted Father") to Abraham which means "father of a multitude."
- https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/genesis/