

Laughing With God
Genesis 17
August 16, 2009
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Hey, do you ever get those things on the internet about bulletin bloopers, you know, that people send around. Have you heard those? I've kept some of them and I thought that these were pretty funny. These are actual announcements in church bulletins.

The sermon this morning: "Jesus Walks on the Water." The sermon tonight: "Searching for Jesus."

"The eighth-graders will be presenting Shakespeare's Hamlet in the church basement Friday at 7 p.m. The congregation is invited to attend this tragedy."

"Mrs. Johnson will be entering the hospital this week for testes."

"Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 p.m. Please use the back door."

"Our next song is "Angels We have Heard Get High."

"This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar."

Now I need to ask you a painful question:

Why did you laugh? You did laugh. Do you take Easter seriously? Do angels really get high? Are low self esteem, sickness, tragedy and sin funny? Don't you take those things seriously? Don't you take God seriously? Do you laugh at God, because God will not be mocked!

One more:

A bean supper will be held on Tuesday evening in the church hall. Music will follow.

That actually reminds me of something I saw years ago at this worship deal, revival thing, in Toronto, Canada. There were like a few thousand of us in this hotel ballroom singing songs and worshipping God and I was watching this group of very well dressed, dignified, middle-aged church ladies that were sitting just about three row in front of me and Susan. During the worship songs, they were really getting into it and at one point one of them started to laugh and then another one started to laugh next to her that this one was laughing and they started laughing together and then some of the others started laughing and then this one particular lady, she laughed so hard that she kinda lost control and made some music. And then the lady setting next to her thought that was really funny and she laughed harder and then she did the same thing and then the ones sitting next to her started laughing even more and before I knew it I was looking at these eight, well-dressed, respectable-looking, middle-aged church ladies lying on the floor, literally rolling around on the floor laughing, crying, making music and stuff. And the people around them just kept right on worshipping. Weirdest thing I've ever seen in church outside of junior high youth group. And they blamed it on the Holy Spirit. The people at the conference called it "Holy Laughter" and said it was part of that revival that maybe you've heard about or read about several years ago, the Toronto Blessing.

You may remember that here in the States there were several pastors and authors that deemed this “Holy Laughter” ungodly. They argued that this laughter is undignified and offensive. Maybe you find it offensive. They argued that laughter belittles and mocks that which is laughed at. They say “God should be taken seriously for God is not mocked.”

Genesis 17:15-19 “And God said [to 99-year-old] Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings and peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself. “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” And God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring [*his seed, his descendants*] after him.

Abraham laughs to himself. Do you get that? Is he laughing at God?

Genesis 18:1-2 “And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him.”

Three men and one of these men is addressed as Yahweh the Lord. Now that’s kinda interesting.

Genesis 18:9-15 “They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife? And he said, “She’s, she’s in the tent.” The Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord (Abraham) is old, shall I have pleasure? The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied it, saying, “I didn’t...I didn’t laugh” cause she was afraid. He said, “No, you did laugh.”

Sarah laughs and the God-Man asks, “Why did you laugh?”

Maybe God is pointing out that Sarah and possibly Abraham don’t take him too seriously. And if they don’t take God seriously it’s because they take themselves seriously, their experiences seriously, their old bodies entirely too seriously. They may actually think that some things are too hard for God and if so, they lack faith. And mock God.

Don’t mock God.

If you come to the Lord’s table, for instance, and think to yourself there is no way that God would die for me, love me, pursue me, sacrifice himself for me, forgive me, give himself to me—there is no way that He would save me or bless me and so you laugh to yourself, then you mock God. And I warn you. God is not mocked and you drink judgment on yourself. How dare you tell God what He cannot do. How dare you take yourself more seriously than God. That’s blasphemy. Is anything too hard for the Lord?

You know the Sanctuary exists because we dared to answer No. There is NO thing too hard for the Lord. For Jesus told us "With God all things are possible!"

So God asks, "Why do you laugh, Sarah?"

Bride of Christ...why do you laugh?"

Genesis 21:1 "The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac."

Now remember God said, "You will call him Isaac" and I neglected to tell you that that word Isaac (Yitschaq) in Hebrew means "he laughs" or "one laughs" from *tsachaq* meaning "laughter." So then the Child of the Promise, the Promised Seed, the Child of the Covenant is literally named "Laughs" by God.

He is a good "Laugh" and Abraham and Sarah desperately needed a good laugh. How about you?

Genesis 21:4-7 "And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old (talked about that last week), as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old (wow, that was wild, did you see that, oh that's great theatrics) and Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

You see? That's funny. And who made laughter? Who made it? God, it says right there. And how did God make laughter. With the only begotten Son born into a desolate place.

And now what are they laughing at? Not God, right? Themselves. Sarah says, "Everyone who hears will laugh over me or "with me" as some translates it.

Who will laugh? Everyone, everyone that hears, and that's a lot of folks maybe all folks according to John 5. All folks and God all laughing together,

Not at God, but with God.

Not alone by themselves, but in communion.

Not in faithlessness but in faith.

Abraham and Sarah had not yet received the Promised Land, right? They are still sojourners. They hadn't yet received the Promised Land, the promised kingdom, however they had received the Promised One, the King.

So they laugh in faith by grace at grace with grace. That is, they take God so incredibly seriously. They no longer take themselves seriously. Like at all. After 25 years of striving, failure, sadness, trying to engineer the blessing. After 25 years of being humbled, having the flesh cut away time after time. After 25 years of dying to themselves, they received the Gift of God, the Promised One by grace and then they all laugh: *taqchaq* over *Yibshaq* born through old Sarah.

Karl Barth writes: "Laughter is man's humble reaction to the amazing and ridiculous fact of man being a recipient of God's honor."

You see, I suspect that the church ladies rolling on the floor in front of us in Toronto, Canada, were laughing like old Sarah. They laughed because the Promised One was with them. And the more they took him seriously, the less they could take themselves seriously. They saw the Christ Child and they laughed at his manger. Themselves. Whether it feels supernatural or not, laughter like that comes from God.

As I've shared with you a few times at that conference in Toronto, I had two utterly remarkable supernatural encounters with God.

In the first, God revealed to me that I had gone into the ministry out of bitterness and anger. In other words, he revealed my flesh. And then he cut it out. He circumcised my heart, like we preached about last time.

In the second encounter that night, he showed me that he was always with me and that he loved me and that I was called into His ministry and I have to tell you that I never, ever, ever in my life have experienced such joy. I lost my life and found it. My heart had been circumcised. And in that spot, in that old manger I encountered ecstasy. For a moment, for a moment I took God seriously and myself, my flesh, not seriously at all.

You realize that you can't serve two masters, right? So either you will take God seriously and laugh at everything else including yourself or you will take yourself seriously and laugh at everything else including God. Of course that's what the Pharisees did. That was their problem. They took themselves so seriously that when the Promised Child arrived, when God incarnate stood in their midst, they laughed at him for they would not laugh at themselves.

Do you laugh much, at yourself? Do you take a joke well? Now that's a very spiritual question. Are you easily offended? If so, maybe there is too much of you to offend.

Steven Lawhead writes, "Truth is a constant delight to them that love her; such beauty holds no power to offend."

And Jesus said, "I am the truth and blessed is he/she who does not take offense at me."

According to Will Willimon at Duke University, sometime in the 6th century AD, a Palestinian monk named Saint Simeon of Salas was kicked out of a church on more than one occasion for throwing nuts at the altar candles. On his last visit to church it was Good Friday. As the priest admonished the faithful to "mortify the flesh in honor of Christ" (that is to "take the ego lightly and to take Christ very seriously"). As the priest admonished the faithful, Saint Simeon pulled out a large sausage and started eating it. While they were dragging Saint Simeon out of the church for the last time, he said this "The essence of human sinfulness is to take ourselves and our own rituals too seriously."

You see, faith is taking God seriously. And if I take God seriously enough, I don't take myself seriously at all. In fact, I've just lost myself. Laughed myself away. Sin is taking myself seriously. I sin because I take my own fear, my own anxiety, my own shame so incredibly seriously. I sin because I take my dreams, my desires, my longings, my appetites so seriously and my ability to obtain them and manage them so

seriously that I won't surrender them to God. I sin because I take my goodness so seriously and God's goodness not seriously at all.

Why we don't laugh more and live more?
Why we don't proclaim the gospel more and give more? You know why
Why we don't rejoice more and love more?

It's because we take ourselves, our flesh, so seriously. We think,

"Who am I to talk about Jesus."
"Who am I to preach good news?"
"Who am I to live with such joy. That would be like asking a shriveled up 90-year-old woman to have a baby and then name it 'Laughter.' Who am I?"

You know when I read those church bulletin bloopers, you should have laughed more and louder, not at God, but where he's born. Not because you don't take him seriously, but because you take him so seriously...because you believe the words of the angels.

"Behold I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all the people for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord and this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

The church is that manger.
The sanctuary.
Us.
The Gift of God is born in us.

"Sing oh barren one.
Sing o barren one
Who did not bear.
Break forth into singing and cry aloud.
Laugh with the angels."

G.K. Chesterton wrote this:

"Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly." [*See angels do get high.*] This, he writes, has been always the instinct of Christendom, and especially the instinct of Christian art. Every figure seems ready to fly up and float about in the heavens. The tattered cloak of the beggar will bear him up like the rayed plumes of the angels. But the kings in their heavy gold and the proud in their robes of purple will all of their nature sink downwards, for pride cannot rise to levity or levitation. Pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. Solemnity flows out of men naturally, but laughter is a leap. It's easy to be heavy; it's hard to be light. Satan fell by a force of gravity.

Gravitous.

You know Satan takes himself very, very, very seriously. He is perpetually offended. He cannot in the least bit take a joke or laugh at himself. None-the-least.

In 1964, my mom took me to see my very first motion picture. I sat through it twice because of its profound spiritual impact upon me. This particular scene gave me one of my favorite pictures of the Kingdom of God. In it Mary Poppins, Burt, Jane, and Michael rush to Uncle Albert's house because he's stuck on the ceiling. For when he laughs, he floats and when he can't stop laughing. So Burt and the children, they laugh themselves to the ceiling with him and Mary Poppins provides the meal and they all commune...they all share a meal together, floating on this ceiling.

Satan fell by force of gravity. And they rise with laughter.

Video: Mary Poppins

BURT: Nice weather we're having this time of year, don't you think?

UNCLE ALBERT: Oh yes. Speaking of weather, the other day when it was so cold, a friend of mine went to buy some long underwear. The shopkeeper said to him, How long do you want to....and my friend said, "well, from about September to March.

[Laughter]

MARY POPPINS: Children, will you please sit up properly. And take your tea Uncle Albert.

UNCLE ALBERT: Oh, thank you my dear. I'm having such a good time. I wish that you could all stay up here all the time.

MICHAEL: We jolly-well have to, there is no way to get down.

UNCLE ALBERT: Oh no, there is a way. Frankly, I don't like to mention it. Because you have to pick something sad.

MARY POPPINS: Then do get on with it please.

UNCLE ALBERT: Let me see. I've got the very thing. Yesterday, when the lady next door answered the bell, there was a man there and the man said to the lady, "I'm terribly sorry, I just ran over your cat."

JANE: Oh, that's sad.

MICHAEL: The poor cat.

UNCLE ALBERT: And then the man said, "I'd like to replace your cat." And the lady said, "that's all right with me, but how are you at catching mice?"

[Laughter]

UNCLE ALBERT: Well you know I thought it was sad. I try, really I do, but everything just ends up so....so hilarious....

[Laughter]

Isn't that great? Uncle Albert. "I try but everything ends up so hilarious."

Maybe you're thinking, yeah right. I live in the real world, not a fairy tale. I don't live in a fairy tale. You want to joke about a dead cat. The sad may turn to glad but I live in a world of dead people and dying people. A world of real sadness, a world of real tragedy and pain.

You ever notice that in comedy, like in a good joke, there is often real sadness, tragedy, and pain. But then something happens and that something changes all the meaning. And the very place of sad becomes the very place of glad. It's at that point that you laugh. When you get it, when you get the new meaning at the punch line.

You may say,

"Well what could be powerful enough to turn all sorrow into joy, to turn all mourning into dancing, to make all things new, because I don't live in a Disney Movie, I live in this world of real sadness, and tragedy, and pain. I live in a world where people wonder in the wilderness, where children are sold into slavery and bondage and women are raped and evil rages on. I live in a world where the only good man that ever lived was stripped, beaten, nail naked to a Roman cross as the religious leaders mocked him with glee and Satan himself thrilled at the death of the Promised One, the Chosen One, the Seed of Abraham, the only begotten Son of God. I live in a world where the only good man that ever lived was crucified by evil."

Well maybe you didn't get the meaning. Maybe you have not yet believed the punch line. Perhaps none of us do or else we'd just like float away. We'd get stuck on the ceiling of the church or somewhere else. Or at least rejoice always making melody to the Lord with all our hearts, always for everything giving thanks in the name of Jesus, the Meaning, the Logos.

John the disciple wrote:

In the beginning was the meaning and the meaning was with God and the meaning was God. The meaning became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have beheld his glory, glory, as of the only Begotten Son.

I hope you remember that Jesus is Isaac's great, great, great, great, great, super great grandson. And Isaac is a picture of Jesus, God's only begotten Son. And God said I will establish my covenant with him as an eternal covenant and for his seed, his offspring, his descendants after him. We are the descendants of Abraham by faith, says Paul, and God says, "Through Isaac shall the descendants be named." We are named by Jesus through Isaac. Our name is "Children of Laughter"—Isaac—and it's the Promised One that makes all who hear laugh. And in the end, it certainly appears that all will hear and so all will laugh at what God has done through Jesus, the only Begotten Son.

Toward the end of his life, God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his laughter. To sacrifice him on Moriah. As you remember at the last minute an angel stops his hand and Isaac is spared. Two thousand years ago, a couple thousand years after that, God the Father gave his Son to be sacrificed on Moriah and no angel would stop his hand. On that cross, Jesus bore all the sadness, tragedy, pain, and shame of an entire fallen world in such a way that when Satan thought he had won, what Satan thought was his greatest victory on Friday was revealed his ultimate and forever defeat on Easter Sunday for Christ rose

from the dead giving new meaning to all creation. He says, "Behold, I make all things new and God reconciles to himself all things making peace by the blood of his cross, writes Paul. So the very place of ultimate sadness becomes the very place of ultimate gladness forever.

And just think: Satan threw the switch that shown the light; the greatest act of evil forever displays the goodness of God and transforms every sin, every shame into ecstasy forever and ever and ever. Amen

And that my friends is orthodox Christian theology. That is what we say we believe and if we took that seriously, oh we'd laugh, and laugh and laugh and laugh.

You see Easter really is hilarious. Jesus really is the punch line for all creation. He dies, then rises, and fills all things as the bible says. Like Uncle Albert says, "Everything seems to end up so hilarious."

You know in the Greek Orthodox tradition, the day after Easter is devoted to telling jokes. You know why? It's because they are convinced that Easter is the ultimate joke upon the Prince of Darkness-Grim.

But you see, you can't get to Easter Sunday without traveling through Friday. And so it's not like we won't suffer; it's not like you become a Christian and oh everything is just a happy experience all the time. I mean, it's not like we won't suffer; it's not like we won't know grief and sin and shame. It's that Jesus bears our grief, sin, and shame. It's his, but we taste it in this world. We do taste it. Perhaps we taste is so we can get the punch line. Get the meaning. Perhaps we suffer with him for a short time that we might laugh with him forever. For Jesus did say, "Your sorrow will turn into joy."

So do you got a lot of sorrow?

Cool.

See all our mourning does turn into dancing. Perhaps all our tears turn into laughter. So without tears, we miss the laughter.

At the start of his ministry, Jesus said, "Blessed are you that weep now for you will laugh, but woe to you that laugh now for you will weep." And that means they didn't have the last laugh; it wasn't the last laugh.

Woe to you...woe because they're laughing without meaning, without Jesus. They don't see him so they can't get him, the meaning. But now we get him by grace through faith. We don't yet live in the Promised Land, but unto us and in us the Promised Child is born so we laugh even now through tears in the land of our exile we laugh by faith.

At the end of Christ's ministry, the night he was betrayed as he sat at the Passover Feast with his disciples, he said this to them "In this world you will have tribulation." People always come to be shocked that they have tribulation. I'm shocked that I have tribulation. He said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."

You know there are people that avoid tribulation in order to be of good cheer, but Christ calls us to suffer tribulation with his good cheer. The church is called to throw parties at the gates of Hell. And that's what Jesus did that night before his cross. They had a feast and do you remember what feast it was? It was the Passover Feast; it was the Jew's greatest feast when they were commanded to

celebrate deliverance even though they were still in the land of exile. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer."

Chesterton wrote this: "Moderate strength is shown in violence. Supreme strength is shown in levity."

We're to show supreme strength. And where do we get that strength? Well the Jews feasted on lamb and Jesus is the Lamb. They laughed because of the Promise and the covenant, and Jesus is the Promise and the covenant. Jesus is the Joy of the Lord and the Joy of the Lord is our strength.

So as they sat at table, that horrific, horrific night, Jesus took bread and he broke it saying "this my body given to you. Take and eat. Do it in remembrance of me." And in the same way, after supper, he took the cup and he said, "This cup, this cup is my blood of the covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you" And then he said this: "I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it with you in my Father's Kingdom."

At this table we encounter our Lord's suffering. But we also anticipate the great banquet, the wedding banquet. At this table our flesh is cut away, but at this table we receive the very life of God. At this table we surrender our sorrow, but at this table we get the punch line: the meaning, the Logos, the meaning of all things. The One that has and will fill all things because you see He has risen and he's rising all around you.

Remember when Sarah laughed at the words of that angel-God-man thing? Remember that? Who was she laughing at? Was it God, man, angel, word? I think she was laughing at Jesus, which means that she was laughing at her great, great, great, great, great, great grandson according to the flesh, the Promised Seed. The promised blessing, which means the Promised Blessing was telling her, "You, Sarah, will give birth to the Promised Blessing and with her laughter she was saying to the Promised Blessing that the Promised Blessing was too hard for God.

And so she laughed. But do you see, all of heaven must have been laughing at Sarah, over Sarah, telling the Promised Blessing that he was too hard for God.

You see God always gets the last laugh, but he's not mean, cause he gives the last laugh to Sarah and to us so that we who once laughed at him will laugh forever with him. Jesus is the last laugh—the end of all things. So please stop taking offense at him—the way, the truth, and the life—and join the party that is the Kingdom.

You know we seem to think that this table is terribly solemn and it is, but sometimes we need to take it more seriously than that.

In Mary Poppins they float to the ceiling on laughter and share a meal with Uncle Albert.

At communion we float into the heavens and feast with God or maybe heaven comes down and we party at the gates of hell. But whatever the case, stop taking yourself so seriously. And take this seriously, the love of God poured out for you.

Let's pray:

Oh, Jesus, you know how seriously I take me. And that is such a burden. Do you take yourself seriously? Say Lord Jesus, I surrender myself to you. I surrender myself to joy. And so Holy Spirit, Spirit of the Living God, would you fall on us? Fill us with faith, which is filling us with joy

because we always and forever get the punch line. And that is that you love us more than any created thing that we've ever seen. Help us believe the gospel, Father. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So as you come forward, do that. That's what you're saying. You're saying, "God I'm going to stop believing all my stuff and experiences and I'm gonna try to start believing this, believing you. Tear off a piece of the bread, dark cups are wine, light cups are juice. And they are both love, the love of God for you and worship.

Communion

Benediction

Amen. You believe that?

I think you believe it about like a mustard seed, that much because if you believed it all the way you'd float away. I really, I just realized it, if I really believed this stuff, I'd die, I'd explode, I'd float away. So you don't believe it all that much actually, but don't worry about it. You got a mustard seed and the mustard seed grows and you can't worry yourself to heaven. Worrying by yourself is finding yourself. And laughing about yourself is losing yourself, and you see why it's so important then that we gather together and worship? Because for a few minutes you took him seriously, and you didn't take you seriously.

What happens when that happens? You abandon yourself to joy.

And now if you are like me, I know what you are thinking. Yeah, yeah, Yeah, that's great but you know I got a mortgage. And I don't know how I'm gonna pay it.

Some of you are pastors. I have to preach next week and I don't know what the rip I'm gonna say.

And I don't know how to get my kids through college and gosh I'm having marital problems.

I actually have a place to live. I mean if I don't worry about myself and get a job and take care of things I could lose my job, I could be under a bridge. I could die.

Yeah, in this world you will have tribulation. But do you get it?

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