

Why is Sarah Laughing?

Genesis 18 (sel.)

July 13, 2008

It isn't too difficult to understand Sarah's laughing, is it? The idea of her becoming pregnant was preposterous to the point of comedy. It wasn't as if she were merely in early menopause. She is closing in on her ninety-first birthday. With her husband Abraham having already turned 100, how could the visit of these three celestial emissaries not be seen as hilarious? Maybe God gave them the wrong address. The more she thinks about it, the more she is convulsed with laughter. She's now holding her stomach, tears running down her wrinkled cheeks, her arthritic ribs aching from trying to hold the laughter in. Yes, it probably was irreverent to laugh at angels, but she really couldn't help it. Abraham managed to keep a straight face until the messengers left. Then they laughed together: a birth paid for by Medicare, Sarah as a Cub Scout Den Mother in her late nineties; their attending their son's soccer games in the second century of life.

The laughter was tinged, though, with irony and even pain. The irony was that decades before this HAD been their dream. In fact they'd had powerful reasons back then, to believe that God had singled them out, not only to have a son, but that that son and his descendants would be the beginning of a new nation of God's chosen people blossoming in a distant land called Canaan.

At the time that Abraham had received that impelling "call" from God, they'd been living comfortably in Mesopotamia. They had a nice suburban home, a couple of chariots in the garage, a slave who come in to clean three days a week, good friends and a pleasant, normal kind of life.

So it had been no minor matter: God telling Abraham to pull up stakes and move to this promised land where, with this promised son, all of this which God had dreamed up would take place. The change and disruption in their life was major. Devout people that they were, though, they obeyed. They put the house up for sale, loaded their stuff into a "u-haul chariot," gave the dog and cat to their paper boy, and headed for Canaan. (Incidentally, Sarah's ne'er-do-well brother, Lot, decided to go along with them.)

Almost nothing went well. Among other things, as they inched their way toward Canaan, they had to live for awhile in Egyptian territory. There they got into a very sticky predicament with the Egyptian pharaoh who wanted Sarah in his harem. It almost ended up that way since Abraham didn't have the guts to tell Pharaoh that Sarah was his wife. He said that she was his sister.

When they finally did get to Canaan, somehow Lot (the no-good brother-in-law) ended up with all of the good acreage, leaving the arid, semi-desert land to Abraham and Sarah. So do you see? This “founding of a new and great nation of God’s chosen people” wasn’t turning out to be the can’t miss, sure-thing, exhilarating divine project that they had imagined.

Worse of all though, was finding out that gynecologically, Sarah was as infertile as all of the worthless real estate that her crooked brother, Lot, had stuck them with. So much for God’s reliability, God’s promises and God’s common sense. That then is why they laughed when decades later they were told that the project was still viable and that now they WOULD have the son promised them so long ago.

My purpose in recounting this story is not merely to terrorize older women in the congregation with the possibility of a late retirement pregnancy. God only pulls this kind of thing very occasionally (although it’s been awhile, so it’s possible that we’re due for one.)

Much more common in human experience, though, are chains of events and twists of fate that are so disheartening and blindly frustrating that they seriously undercut people’s ability to trust or to believe or even to care about much of anything any longer. Yes, things can happen or fail to happen that, for all the world, make it seem as if there is a dark conspiracy to shatter the dream, destroy the vision or torpedo the noble goal. One can only bounce back, regroup, keep-on-keeping-on so many times before there comes the feeling that there is “a message” here that I’d better quit ignoring. “This can’t be right or good and go this badly.”

What must have felt like a prime example was in a historical account of the wedding day of a certain 19th Century European duke and princess in 1867. During the formal wedding procession, the king’s aide fell from his horse and died on the spot. Next, at the palace gate, they discovered that the palace gatekeeper had committed suicide by cutting his own throat. Then, for no obvious reason, the woman in charge of the bride’s royal wardrobe hanged herself in the midst of the event. The man at the head of the wedding procession fainted from heatstroke. Later in the day, the best man shot himself. And topping it all off, as the honeymoon train arrived to pick up the newlyweds, it ran over and killed the station master. (Their album of wedding pictures must have resembled an issue of the National Inquirer.)

It wouldn’t require a particularly superstitious bride and groom to wonder if they weren’t being told by the cosmos or by God or by evil spirits that their marriage was doomed to dramatic failure. A string like that, of senseless setbacks, a long series of mishaps the

popping up of unprecedented hindrances and a shower of mind-boggling coincidences have been known to wring the hope, the trust, the resilience out of even the most determined, devoted and committed person.

When, for example, her principles, convictions and values are assaulted by back-to-back disillusionments, violations and frustrations, how can she not laugh at the idea of there still being any meaning or purpose in life. How many remarkable public figures, ones who had been trusted and looked up to need to turn out to have major character flaws after all, or have dirty little secrets, or be real hypocrites before a good person can no longer hold off the conclusion that “they’re all alike,” that the idea of human goodness is a childish illusion?

Hasn’t one earned the right to skepticism, pessimism or atheism when his genuinely dedicated efforts, his extensive personal sacrifices, his unwavering devotion, not only went nowhere at all, but it came to feel like the universe was laughing at him.

What does a reasonable, ordinarily optimistic person make of that disheartening year when first, her husband moved in with a woman he works with, then she lost her job because of sticking to her principles, then came the discovery that the friends who she thought were her emotional support-system were not that at all, and then came the onset of severe, stress-related health problems?

To be a good person is one required to just keep letting him or herself be hurt by hope over and over again? Isn’t it rather the case that W.C. Fields had it right when he recommended, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try and try again. Then give it up. There’s no use becoming a damn fool over it.”

That, then, is what hangs over this very ancient story of Abe and Sarah’s disillusioning experience at the hands of God. More to the point, what do you and I make of it when we end up living some version of it? One piece of it could be this: that when the outcome of the hope, of the commitment, of the expectation, for what had been so promising, is the opposite of what it ought to have been, faith and character do not require that we sweep our hurt and frustration under the rug. Stifling or denying what feels like abuse from God isn’t an admirable virtue. I certainly understand (and I suspect many of you do too) Abraham and Sarah’s sardonic, irreverent laughter that afternoon when the three strangers come by to tell them that Sarah is pregnant. Their reaction was an honest, authentic and maybe even “healing” one.

The story, incidentally, includes God's response to their laughing. God says, in effect, "So...Abe and Sally, you think this is pretty hilarious, do you? Perhaps so. In fact I want you to name this son that will be born, "Isaac." "Isaac" was their word for laughter.)

That was brilliant. For every time Abraham and Sarah spoke their son's name in the years to come, they would be reminded yet again, how ridiculously comic had seemed the very idea that with all the time that had passed, with all that had gone wrong and with all that had failed to materialize to fulfill their calling, that there could still be any promise. Their son whose name was "Laughter" would remind them and all of us, that we seldom if ever see the full geography of God's grace except after the fact,

They would be reminded by the very existence of their son, Laughter, of the whimsical way that God frequently ends up being most present and most creative in those very episodes in which we would swear that God has most abused us, jerked us around, and neglected us.

Some years ago a friend of mine, another UCC minister, more or less lived this story. He had had a vasectomy after their second child was born. Then, twelve years later, his wife developed symptoms that strongly resembled early pregnancy. Subsequently it was determined that she was indeed pregnant. It won't tax your imagination to surmise that this discovery led directly to some stress and confusion.

As quickly as it could be scheduled my friend was checked by a urologist, and, sure enough, his vasectomy had reversed itself. Those organic parts had reconnected. A healthy baby boy was born and you guessed it: notwithstanding their having had several days when no one was laughing, they named him "Isaac."

But whether or not you or I might be driven to sarcastic laughter in the face of it seeming as if life and circumstance have gotten beyond the reach of any intelligent hope, the most vital part of what is to be remembered from this is that you and I never know nearly as much as we think we do about how and when God might be reworking things in us, or might begin using something of us that we didn't know was there, or might be revealed in the midst of what we thought was most hopeless about us. You've probably heard many of the more startling examples of it.

Albert Einstein couldn't speak until he was four years old. He was unable to learn to read until he was seven. He, of all people, flunked freshman math class. The thought that there was anything promising about him was laughable, right?

Beethoven's music teacher stated as a simple fact that "As a composer, Ludwig is absolutely hopeless!" And after Ludwig's having heard his lack of promise stated so

categorically, who would have blamed him had he laughed at what had been his dream and just gone into door-to-door piano sales.

When Thomas Edison was in elementary school his teachers all agreed that he was incapable of learning.

Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor because he lacked imagination – had no creative ideas.

One of the early music teachers of the great Caruso carefully explained to him that he just couldn't sing. "You really have no singing voice at all," she told him.

When Harry Truman was thirty-eight, an age by which one can certainly tell (can't one?) whether or not someone has any promise, he was deeply in debt and out of work. A little more than two decades later he was the leader of the free world.

You've probably heard countless other stories like those; ones where the things reach a point (as they had for Abraham and Sarah) where the very idea of hope or promise or relevance has become laughable — absurd. "I'm too old." "She is too shy." "It's much too late." "Too much has been ruined." "It has gone on far too long." "He's too eccentric." "C'mon, don't make me laugh." "Get real, for God's sake."

But it's not really "for God's sake," is it? The sardonic laughter, the disparaging, the scoffing is what we sometimes do for our own sakes when it hurts a lot and we don't want to be hurt yet again by hope. It's understandable, it's tempting and it feels, moreover, like we are only "being realistic." What, some of the time it is, though, is self-fulfilling. So watch out for it.

God, meanwhile, no matter what is your or my age or health or past record or impairment, continues constantly to nudge and to invite and to impel and to disturb and to confront us as much as God can without infringing upon our freedom. Be wary of shrugging-off whatever flame of possibility, of a dream, or a calling the flickers even faintly within you. Hopefully it is other than giving birth at age 90, but you CAN take it from old Sarah, the promise that YOU ARE is intact as long as you draw breath.