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Jun

A Miracle Called Laughter

Forming a Family/Preparing a People

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

What Abraham, Sarah, and a few holy detours teach us about laughter, attention, and God's surprising grace.

REFERENCES

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

Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Texts: Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)

Like many couples, my wife and I struggled with infertility for years. We had been trying for a family, enduring medical tests and various procedures, and nothing happened. As the tests grew more invasive and the procedures more expensive and riskier, the emotions were raw and troubling. While we cannot claim that we held a promise from God that we would be the parents of a nation, we did feel like we were missing out on something significant and transforming. We knew something of the longing that must have driven Abram and Sarai throughout their marriage. There are, of course, cultural differences and identity issues that made life for them different than

it was for us. Even so, I read these texts with an emotional resonance that is somewhat hard to describe.

We've skipped ahead in the story. Last week, we remembered the call; this week, we have the family beginnings. You know, we missed a lot—a lot of wrong turns, a lot of taking matters into our own hands, of pushing the will of God just a little bit. We'll face some of the consequences of those choices next week. But for now, we are on the brink of a miracle. It's always wise to pay attention to a miracle. At the same time, it is also wise not to let the miracle distract us from everything else going on in the story.

For example, hospitality is more than a prelude to the miracle. It is an invitation to usher in the presence of God. It is hard to overstate how important the issue of hospitality—the treatment of strangers— is to the nature of God. When we desire to represent the kingdom of God and exemplify the character of Christ, how we welcome is central. Did Abraham know that these three travelers were a manifestation of God? Maybe, but probably not. He was just living out the nomadic people's treatment of strangers. Does this mean there were no rules about belonging and citizenship? Well, of course not. But it does mean that demeaning those who are different and treating them cruelly is antithetical to the people of God. Abraham gives witness to that idea.

He also gives witness to how one responds to a miracle. This, it seems to me, is the heart of the text for this week. We wrestle with miracles in the Bible. What are we supposed to do with them? How central to our faith do they need to be? There is a lot of debate about the miracles in the Bible. Some want us to accept them at face value; others want to demythologize them and find some natural explanation. We can go around and around on this, and sometimes the academic debate is fun and an interesting diversion for theologians, biblical scholars, and those who like to pretend. In the end, it is a choice.

So, rather than trying to decide, why not look at Abraham and Sarah as an example of how one embraces a miracle? Look at how they responded to this impending miracle and then to the reality when it came to be. That means we need to examine both parts of the text, the parenthetical fulfillment in chapter 21. The second part of the reading helps us define the first. Chapter 18, on its own, could be seen as disbelief, as dismissal. The laughter that comes from them both (see Genesis 17:17) is more than that. We don't have a psychological analysis of either of them. But assuming disbelief is not unreasonable. "In my old age," they each declare. Such things just aren't done. It is not the normal way of things. So, of course, disbelief is a part of the response that led to laughter. But it is the laughter itself that seems telling.

It could have been anger. It could have been frustration. “Where were you years ago when such a thing could have happened?” Why tease with this cruel, impossible promise? But it wasn’t anger or frustration. It wasn’t rejection or abandonment. It was laughter, which could be a bearer of hope. Of course, it is impossible; of course, it is outrageous to imagine. And yet... Did they imagine life in this impossible scenario and find joy in it? Was that the source of the laughter? It seems that it was. Why else would Sarah name the child Laughter as a reminder of this gift, this miracle, this joy?

My wife and I had begun to resign ourselves to being childless until another avenue opened. We pursued adoption and then international adoption. And after many months (nine months to be precise!) and many legal procedures and financial requirements, we found ourselves at O’Hare airport, anxiously waiting to meet our son, escorted from South Korea. When the tired international escorts thrust this small bundle into my arms, laughter and tears were both present. We weren’t brave enough to name our son Laughter, as Sarah and Abraham did. But we could have. It was all there, wrapped up in a child and sudden parents, a family we almost couldn’t imagine until it was real.

Miracles aren’t meant to be explained or even understood. They are to be received with joy and laughter. The grace of this moment is the wonder of God acting in ways that stagger the imagination. And if we pay attention, our imagination is staggered regularly. Abraham and Sarah were staggered, but they were also able to laugh. They were in touch with joy. That is what was behind the laughter, alongside the disbelief. It was all mixed in together. But that doesn’t diminish the significance of joy and hope. It is part of the gift.

The miracle of laughter is a gift; that’s how we understand it. That’s how we grasp joy itself. The writer and minister Frederick Buechner preached of this joy in a sermon titled “The Monkey-God”:

*But we never take credit for our moments of joy because we know that they are not man-made and that we are never really responsible for them. They come when they come. They are always sudden and quick and unrepeatable. The unspeakable joy sometimes of just being alive. The miracle sometimes of being just who we are with the blue sky and the green grass, the faces of our friends and the waves of the ocean, being just what they are. ... The joy of love, which is the joy of the flesh as well as the spirit. (Buechner, “The Monkey-God”, collected in *The Hungering Dark*, Seabury Press, 1981, 102.)*

Buechner says that human beings are made for joy. Like the laughter that spills from Abraham and from Sarah, we are gifted this joy in surprising, even miraculous ways. And our calling is to be ready to embrace the miracle of living with laughter.

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