

The Journey of Faith: Laughter

1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. 2 Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

3 Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. 5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. 8 The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

15 God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. 16 I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

17 Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

19 Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. 20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. 21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." 22 When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

18:1 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.
2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. 4 Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. 5 Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

7 Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. 8 He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. 10 Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. 11 Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

13 Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." 15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." (Genesis 17:1-18:15)

That is, probably about 36 pounds or about 16 kilograms

20 Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22 Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. 23 “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. 24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. 25 Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets. (Luke 6:20-26)

More Waiting

Last week, we read that Abram and Sarai had waited ten years for the fulfillment of God’s promise to provide them a son. We saw the differences between passive waiting, active waiting, and faithful waiting. And after all the drama surrounding the birth of Ishmael, and the family pyrotechnics it involved, one would expect that the next chapter in Abram’s story would happen quickly. And one would be wrong.

This morning’s story begins when Abram was 99 year old. That means that this story occurs 15 years after the previous one, and it occurs 25 years after God’s initial promise to Abram in Genesis 12. Why the “delay”? Perhaps, God wanted to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the birth of Isaac would be because of God, and not because of Abraham nor Sarah. But we are not told why. All we are told is that this happened after a long period of waiting.

Isn’t this the way it goes in waiting? While we are waiting, we fidget, we are nervous, we look at the clock every few minutes, the seconds seem like minutes and the minutes seem like hours, and the hours seem like days. And yet, when what we are waiting for arrives, we forget all about the waiting.

In the Harry Potter novels, one gets to the train to Hogwarts School through Gate 9¾. It is a gate only used by magical people. I wonder what Genesis chapter 16¾ would be like. I wonder what happened in those additional 15 years of waiting. We saw how the ten years of waiting were almost unbearable, how much more unbearable would the next 15 years

be? And yet, they were bearable, and that brings us close to the fulfillment of God's promise.

So God makes the promise plain. Abram will have a son, with Sarah, before the next year. And Abraham laughed. He still seems to think that God will fulfill his promises through Ishmael, who is now about 15 years old. But God says, "no", the promised child will be born of Sarah, and his name will be Isaac.

Let me pause and reflect for a moment there. Abraham knew about Ishmael, he was used to having him around, Ishmael was his son. And because Sarah had still not had children, after 25 years, perhaps Abraham fell back on the one son he had, and that was enough. How often we as individuals, or families, or churches, or companies, settle for what we already know. And we do not risk believing there is anything better for us to do. So we keep doing the same things in the same ways, and think that's all there is. We settle for Ishmael. And while God will surely bless Ishmael, God's favor will rest more heavily on Isaac. What is your Ishmael today? What are you clinging to from the past? What new thing might God be calling you to experience?

Laughter

Laughter. Lots of laughter in this story this morning. Abraham laughs, and later, Sarah laughs. Not the laughter of cynicism. Not the cheap laughter of some superficial joke. But the deep heartfelt laughter of the absurdity of the situation, and the joy of the possibilities promised by God. Hearty laughter comes out of genuine suffering and tears. And Abraham and Sarah have suffered, for 25 years, knowing they would have a son, but not yet. Year after year they waited, and not yet. Finally, the day came when God renewed the promise, and a name was given, and a deadline was given. Within a year! Too good to be true! They laughed. And when the child is born, he will be named Isaac, which means "laughter".

Laughter is a powerful force. The great theme in the Pixar animated movie, "Monsters, Inc." is that laughter has more energy than fear. I love being part of memorial services where funny stories are told about the deceased, and there is laughter. It is OK to grieve and laugh. Laughter, as Reader's Digest reminds us, is good medicine. Beware of people who do not laugh. Beware of people who are always serious, who are always carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders, who scowl at others who laugh.

However, in the passages from Luke read by Barbara this morning, Jesus contrasts laughter and mourning. In this great reversal, those who mourn are promised laughter, while those who live an easy life, and laugh all the time, for whom everything works right, they will mourn. There is an intimate connection between tears and laughter.

I remember reading a story in late 1989 or early 1990 in National Geographic about a visit to what had been East Berlin. The Wall had been knocked down in 1989, but Berlin was still deeply divided. There was life and color and art in the former West Berlin. The former East Berlin was gray, and lifeless, and forlorn. The author had been walking some streets of former East Berlin, and stopped by a little house church. A gathering of people who were singing with joy and gusto and energy. He was so caught up in the singing that he stayed. After the service, he began talking with one of the older women. She had lived in East Berlin her whole life, from before WWII. She knew of nothing else. And she described the many hardships that she had encountered. Relatives who died in the War, either on the Eastern Front or from bombing raids. The deprivations of living behind the Iron Curtain, like the constant bread lines. And so the author finally asked her, "Then how can you sing so joyfully?" She replied, with a twinkle in her eye, "Only those who have suffered can sing." "Only those who have suffered can sing." What a great insight! Suffering, far from dampening the human spirit, can be transformed into joy by the presence of God, and the hope He gives us in Christ. "Only those who have suffered can sing."

A Story

In a sermon entitled "God's Ways Are Unreasonable," missionary professor Del Tarr uses a powerful illustration from West Africa (where he served fourteen years with the Assemblies of God) to illumine Psalm 126:5-6: "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him."

I grew up in a preacher's home in the little towns of Minnesota and South Dakota. I spent most of my free time with the deacons' kids on John Deere tractors, International Harvesters, Cases, Minneapolis-Molines. I learned how to drill oats, plant corn, and cultivate. And never once did I see a deacon behave like Psalm 126 says. What was there to weep about at sowing time?

I was always perplexed by this Scripture . . . until I went to the Sahel, that vast stretch of savanna more than four thousand miles wide just under the Sahara Desert, with a climate much like the Bible lands. In the Sahel, all the moisture comes in a four-month period: May, June, July, and August. After that, not a drop of rain falls for eight months. The ground cracks from dryness, and so do your hands and feet. The winds off the Sahara pick up the dust and throw it thousands of feet into the air. It then comes slowly drifting across West Africa as a fine grit. It gets in your mouth. It gets inside your watch and stops it. It gets inside your refrigerator (if you have one).

The year's food, of course, must all be grown in four months. People grow sorghum or milo in fields not larger than this sanctuary. Their only tools are the strength of their backs and a short-handled hoe. No Massey-Fergusons here; the average annual income is between eighty-five and one hundred dollars per person.

October and November . . . these are beautiful months. The granaries are full-the harvest has come. People sing and dance. They eat two meals a day-one about ten in the morning, after they've been to the field awhile, and the other just after sundown. The sorghum is ground between two stones to make flour and then a mush with the consistency of yesterday's cream of wheat. The sticky mush is eaten hot; they roll it into little balls between their fingers, drop it into a bit of sauce, and then pop it into their mouths. The meal lies heavy on their stomachs so they can sleep.

December comes, and the granaries start to recede. Many families omit the morning meal. Certainly by January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals a day.

By February, the evening meal diminishes. People feel the clutch of hunger once again. The meal shrinks even more during March, and children succumb to sickness. You don't stay well on half a meal a day.

April is the month that haunts my memory. The African dusk is quiet, there are no jet engines, no traffic noises to break the

stillness. The dust filters down through the air, and sounds carry for long distances. April is the month you hear the babies crying in the twilight . . . from the village over here, from the village over there. Their mothers' milk is now stopped.

Parents go at this time of year to the bush country, where they scrape bark from certain trees. They dig up roots as well, collect leaves, and grind it all together to make a thin gruel. They may pawn a chair, a cooking pot, or bicycle tires in order to buy a little more grain from those wealthy enough to have some remaining, but most often the days are passed with only an evening cup of gruel.

Then, inevitably, it happens. A six- or seven-year-old boy comes running to his father one day with sudden excitement. "Daddy! Daddy! We've got grain!" he shouts.

"Son, you know we haven't had grain for weeks."

"Yes, we have!" the boy insists. "Out in the hut where we keep the goats-there's a leather sack hanging up on the wall-I reached up and put my hand down in there-Daddy, there's grain in there! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!"

The father stands motionless.

"Son, we can't do that," he softly explains. "That's next year's seed grain. It's the only thing between us and starvation. We're waiting for the rains, and then we must use it."

The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do, the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall . . . and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he goes to the field and—I've seen it—with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and throws it away.

He scatters it in the dirt! Why? Because he believes in the harvest.

The seed is his; he owns it. He can do anything with it he wants. The act of sowing it hurts so much that he cries. But as the African pastors say when they preach on Psalm 126, "Brothers and sisters, this is God's law of the harvest. Don't expect to rejoice later on unless you have been willing to sow in tears."

Tarr concludes: I want to ask you: How much would it cost you to sow in tears? I don't mean just giving God something from your abundance, but finding a way to say, "I believe in the harvest, and therefore I will give what makes no sense. The world would call me unreasonable to do this-but I must sow regardless, in order that I may someday celebrate with songs of joy."

I love that story. It is touching and powerful. I wonder whether our church, or any church, can grow unless we sow in tears. And allow God to turn our mourning into laughter.

Communion

Today we celebrate the Lord's Supper, remembering Christ's sacrifice for us. In the garden, Jesus wept great tears, and asked the cup be taken from him. But he also vowed to do what God wanted, and not what he himself wanted.

Then Jesus was arrested, tried, falsely accused, beaten, mocked, tortured, and hung on a Roman cross, naked, on the city garbage dump. He bore in his body the penalty for our sins, for every act of rebellion against God, for every careless word uttered or written, for every spiteful action towards other people, for doing what we think best rather than what God thinks best.

The breaking of the bread symbolizes Christ's body broken for us. The pouring of the cup symbolizes the pouring out of Christ's blood for us.

Nothing was held back. Why? Out of sheer obedience? Out of some sense of duty, or martyrdom? Hebrews 12:2-3 says this:

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Jesus went to the cross for joy. He knew that on the other side of the cross awaited a grand reunion with His father, and with His disciples, and the possibility of reconciliation of all people to God. The joy of doing the right thing, that would affect billions of people. The joy of hearing a hearty “well done” from His heavenly Father.

My friends, in this vale of tears, there are tears, there is loss, there is sorrow, there is hardship. But there is also joy. May you experience the joy of the Lord as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper.