

The gospel of laughter – Genesis 17:1-5, 15-17, 18:1-15, 21:1-7

Can I tell you a joke? Who was the smartest man in the Bible? *Abraham. He knew a Lot!*

Of course, this joke only works if you know Abraham's nephew was called Lot, and perhaps this morning's reading requires *a lot* of background knowledge; that we meet Abraham (or Abram as he was known then) and Sarai's (Sarah's) family back in Genesis 11; that in Genesis 12 Abram is called to leave behind everything because a. God will give him a new land; b. make of him a great nation and c. through him bless all the people of the earth. And then from chapters 12 to chapters 17 we have Abram and Sarai having adventures and misadventures and God repeating those promises.

But one detail we know from the very beginning, from Genesis 11: 30 is that Sarai could not have children, and so each time God mentions the great nation, your offspring, as plentiful as the dust, as countless as the stars... tension is building. I kind of imagine it's like that first conversation you have with someone who gets some crucial detail wrong. Your husband's name for example. And you spend forty years pretending Aron's name is Phillip. *"Are you going to tell God or am I?" "Doesn't he know you can't have children?"*

So when we get to chapter 17 and God is talking about being exceedingly numerous, about multitudes of nations, about marking the significance of this by changing their names the joke – the joke which also contains a great deal of human heartbreak – as many jokes often do - reaches a climax, and as we heard in the reading everyone breaks down and laughs.

Can I tell you another joke – about another Abram and Sarah?

An old man called Abram is on his deathbed and his faithful wife of seventy or so years is by his side, and he turns to her and says, "Sarah, we've been married for over 70 years. When we somehow survived the war, you were with me" Sarah replies "Yes, I was, Abram."

And Abram says, "When the economy went down, and our business went under, you were there with me." Sarah says "Yes, I was, my love."

"And when we lost our home, and lived in a hovel, you were there with me." "Yes, sweetheart," she says "I was."

"And when our children went off the rails and got in all sorts of trouble, and we didn't know how we'd get them back on the right path.... you were there." Sarah's tears are flowing now. "Yes, yes, I was Abram."

Abram looks at her. "I'm beginning to think you're bad luck, Sarah."

I tell that joke because the thing that really annoys me about this story – the three mysterious visitors turning up at the worst possible time with the baby

announcement - in the heat of the day and when both parents are past 90 is that for some reason – patriarchy? - the commentators blame Sarah for laughing. Chapter 18, verse 12; *“Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’* She’s being sneaky about it, they say, listening at the tent entrance... or it’s the way she laughs, she’s scoffing at God’s promise... or it’s because she denies it!

Which is why I think it is so helpful to read the section from chapter 17, where Abraham doesn’t just laugh quietly behind a tent flap, he falls on his face laughing, saying *“Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah who is ninety years old, bear a child?”*

As Kathryn Schiofferdecker, Professor of Old Testament, writes, *“It seems likely that Genesis 17 and 18 were originally two different stories told to explain Isaac’s name; but as we have them now, they function as ‘his’ and ‘hers’ equal-opportunity annunciations.”*

And equal opportunity occasions for laughter! Laughter that erupts naturally when something has been building for so long that it patently preposterous. A baby at our age? What is God thinking? And laughter that helps us cope when something hits deep at the deepest griefs that we carry. How could what we have longed for so long possibly happen now?

Laughter has many positive benefits, we’re told. It relieves stress and tension – a good hearty laugh (a falling on your face kind of laugh) relaxes your muscles for up to 45 minutes. Laughter also boosts your immune system and improves your heart function and triggers the release of endorphins, our bodies’ feel-good chemicals, that can even temporarily relieve pain. And laughter can also be one of the most effective ways to diffuse anger, to help us move on and let go of bitterness and resentment.

Which is what I think happens in this story with the three mysterious visitors – who somehow turn out to be God! Who know that Sarah is laughing inside the tent - while aching inside - after years of anger and grief. And God calls it out. *“Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”* And, somehow, despite the cultural conventions of women being not seen and not heard, this dialogue continues directly. *“O God!”* Sarah says, *“I didn’t laugh!”* (I mean – what else are you going to say to God?) *“Oh, yes,”* says God, and I can’t imagine this being said without gentleness, tenderness, playfulness, *“Oh yes, you did!”*

[As an aside, the rabbis noted God did not repeat all of Sarah’s words, taking out the reference to Abraham also being old, and decided from this it is acceptable to tell a small white lie so as not hurt someone’s feelings!]

But I think we can recognise that for both Abraham and Sarah this laughter is involuntary, that it releases years of tension and grief, that it is healthy laughter, and when God joins in on the joke, it is also holy laughter.

Can I tell you another joke?

A Catholic priest and a rabbi both board a train. It's a Blue Mountains service so they spend most of the day getting on and off buses and they reach a point where they are sharing confidences like old friends. "Tell me," Rabbi", said the priest, "between ourselves, have you ever tasted bacon?"

"Well, Father, I have to admit I did try some once. Just to satisfy my curiosity, you understand. What about you? While we are sharing our most intimate secrets, have you ever been tempted to break your vow of chastity?"

"Well, Rabbi, yes. I must admit I did, just the once, just to satisfy my curiosity, you understand'."

There was a moment of silence, and the Rabbi said, "Beats the hell out of bacon, doesn't it?"

Is laughter also an aphrodisiac? Yes, we're told. Lowering our stress levels and releasing endorphins is a powerful psychological and physiological aphrodisiac! Perhaps for Abraham and Sarah it put behind them – put to bed! – years of shame and recrimination, years of an absence of joy and enjoyment. As Sarah says, *"After I am old and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"*

Writer Jonathan Rogers says that although the birth of Isaac is miraculous, there is *"no suggestion whatsoever that Sarah got pregnant ...by any means other than the tried-and-true method."*

He speaks about, *"hearing an old radio preacher in Georgia"* and forgetting *"everything about the sermon except one sentence spoken in a husky, suggestive voice: 'Abraham looked over at Sarah, and she looked-ed good to him, and Sarah looked over at Abraham, and he looked-ed good to her...'"*

And the result is the thing Abraham fell over laughing about, and the thing Sarah laughed – because if you don't laugh you'll cry – about comes to pass, and they call the child that is born, Isaac meaning 'laughter'.

Our lives are not intended to be cookie cutter images of the biblical stories, but our lives are also full of adventures and misadventures and full of repeated promises that God will give us life and life abundantly, that God will forgive our sins and wrongdoing, that God will meet our needs, that God will give us peace, that God will always be with us.

"There is a deep pleasure in the gospel," Jonathan Rogers writes, "that nobody talks about very much, and it is the pleasure of saying, 'Oh, What a

fool I have been! I was so sure I knew how this thing was going to turn out. I shaped my life around a foolish assumption that the world was telling me the truth about itself and my place in it. I was so wrong! Halleluiah! I lived in fear of things that had no power to harm me! I thought I had to exert my will and get my way! But now I don't have to anymore. Halleluiah!

If I were a preacher, [he goes on] I would have an altar call, and all you would have to do would be to come down to the front and say, 'Oh, what a fool I've been! I took myself so damned seriously!' [And] I'm not using that word 'damned' casually. Is there anything so damning as excessive self-regard?"

Christian apologist G.K. Chesterton writes:

Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly. This has always been the instinct of Christian art... In the old Christian pictures, the sky over every figure is like a blue or gold parachute. 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... For solemnity flows out of men [and women] naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity.

Can I tell you a joke? The story of salvation is a story of laughable moments. When a really really old couple had a baby. When people who had been slaves became a nation. When God became a human baby. When Jesus tricked death and all who wanted him dead and rose again. When ordinary men and women – you and I – became part of this story. *"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"*