

And then... God Created Laughter

Hespeler, June 14, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Third Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7, Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:8

One day, back at the very beginning, God turned to the first man and said, “Adam, I want you to do something for me...”

Adam said, “Gladly, Lord, what do you want me to do?”

God said, “Go down into that valley.”

Adam said, “What’s a valley?”

God explained it to him. Then God said, “Cross the river.”

Adam said, “What’s a river?”

God explained that to him, and then said, “Go over to the hill...”

Adam said, “What is a hill?”

So, God explained to Adam what a hill was and said, “On the other side of the hill you will find a cave.”

Adam said, ‘What’s a cave?’

After God explained, God said, “In the cave you will find a woman.”

Adam said, “What’s a woman?”

So God explained that to him, too. Then, God said, I want you to reproduce.

“Well, how do I do that?” Adam asked.

God’s eyes rolled, and then, just like everything else, God explained that to Adam, as well.

So, Adam goes down into the valley, across the river, and over the hill, into the cave, and finds the woman. Then, in five minutes, he was back.

God’s patience was wearing thin. “What is it now?” God wanted to know.

And Adam said... “What is a headache?!”

Laughter in the Church

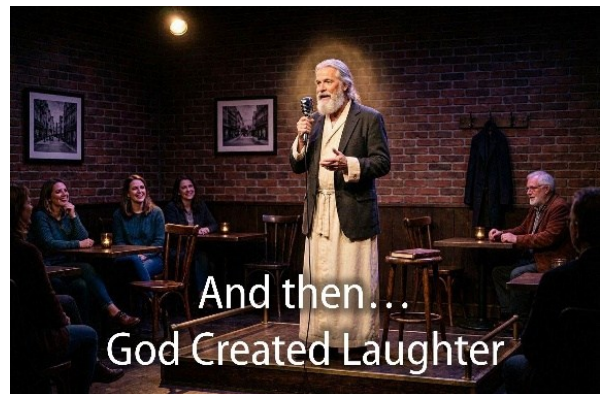
What is that I hear? Is that laughter in the church? And did you know that there was a time, not all that long ago, when it would have been considered quite unseemly for there to be laughter in a church? Worship was considered to be very serious business! It was all about judgement and repentance.

This was especially true for Presbyterians. They were kind of famous for it. Their ministers wore black, and they never smiled. And if you went to church and smiled or, heaven forbid, you laughed, they would definitely let you know that you were out of line.

Things have changed, and they have certainly changed for the better. I am glad to be part of a church that doesn’t merely tolerate smiles and laughter, but that celebrates them. I am sure that God loves nothing more than a church regularly filled with laughter.

Abraham and Sarah’s Struggle

In fact, God loves laughter so much that God took some extraordinary steps to bring it into the life of two people. And I think that their story has a great



deal to say to us, and maybe especially to the church, today.

Abraham and Sarah were struggling, you see. They had a good life. They had found a good place to live and had even built a great deal of wealth and security for themselves, but something was missing for them.

They had no children. And, because they had no children, it was often as if everything they had built for themselves had lost meaning. What did it matter if they had wealth and prosperity if they had no one that they could pass it down to? What did it matter if they tried to do good now, if it would all be forgotten once they had passed away?

Congregations Worrying about Future?

It is kind of like the situation that many churches find themselves in these days. They know they have received a rich heritage from their ancestors. They have valuable assets, such as properties and buildings, that they have inherited from those who have gone before.

But the church, even as it enjoys all these things and may even do its best to use those resources to do a lot of good in the community and in the world, is dealing with deep anxiety about the future. We worry that we are not connecting with a younger generation as we did in the past. This is seen in a lack of children and young people.

It is not that there are no youth at all (though some congregations are certainly grappling with that issue). It is more that we don't see the huge numbers of them in full programs as we did in previous generations. We worry that, when the generations that have so strongly supported the church are gone, there will be no one to take over.

God Sends Them Laughter

Well, we are told that God came down and addressed Abraham and Sarah directly as they dealt with their struggles. And I believe that God will do the same for us if we allow it. So, what did God offer them? Here is the funny thing: God offered them laughter.

There they were, camping out by the oaks of Mamre, wanderers still with no home and no children to pass a home down to. And God just kind of dropped in one day.

Actually, three strangers dropped by – strangers to whom Abraham and Sarah offered exceptional hospitality – but it turned out that those strangers somehow represented the presence of God.

Setup and Punchline

And then at the end of the excellent meal, God told a joke. That is what happened. Now there are various kinds of jokes and various ways to get people to laugh. But one tried-and-true method employs what is called a setup followed by a punchline. Basically, you set your audience up with a certain expectation, and then you violate that expectation.

That is the basic structure of many jokes. Take this joke for example: “My dog used to chase people on a bike all the time. It got so bad, I finally had to take his bike away.” And I know that you're not supposed to explain how jokes work, but let me do it for that one anyway.

The first line, “My dog used to chase people on a bike all the time,” sets up a certain expectation. That's why it is called a setup. It puts a picture in your mind of a bad dog running after people who are riding bikes. But the punchline, “It got so bad, finally I had to take his bike away,” defies that expectation. Now you are picturing a dog riding a bike and that picture is all the funnier for being utterly ridiculous.

Sarah's Setup

So, what was the joke that God told Abraham and Sarah? **“I will surely return to you in due season,”** God says, **“and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”** And yes, I know that doesn't quite have the classic setup-and-punchline structure, but trust me, it was hilarious. It was so funny that it made Sarah laugh so hard in the tent that God could hear her.

The setup wasn't the first line of the joke but rather the entire story up until that point. It was years upon years of disappointment as Sarah struggled with infertility and with not living up to the expectations that society put upon her. The setup was the unrelenting cycle of hope giving way to despair every single month. It was her giving into the realization her chances were finally gone and **“it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.”**

And, with all that set up, what God was promising Sarah was ridiculous. Not only was it biologically impossible for her to have a child, but it also challenged and overturned all of her feelings of disappointment and despair. It forced her to challenge the hard reality to which she had already reconciled herself.

Given such an unexpected and ridiculous punchline, Sarah reacted in the only way she could; she laughed.

God's Punchlines

And I am convinced that God loves to make us laugh in that way. I know that you have all lived through that setup at some point in your life. You have been discouraged. You have felt as if you lost your way. All of us have those kinds of experiences. Maybe some of you are there right now in your life.

Well, just know that you have a God who loves to deliver you a punchline so full of ridiculous hope that it will make you laugh with joy. Remember some of those times in your life when you were fearing the worst, imagining that everything was about to fall apart? How often did the worst happen? It generally doesn't. And even when bad things do happen, when the dark clouds gather, there is almost always a silver lining somewhere nearby. So, we really ought to learn to laugh more at the worst things that we can imagine.

I wouldn't want to leave you with the impression that terrible things *never* happen. Of course they do, and when they do, we also have a God who is ready to meet us in our sorrow, who weeps with us and for us. But don't forget that God also looks forward to the next opportunity to laugh with you.

Nine Months Later

So, God told Sarah a joke. But there was also another punchline waiting for her – an even better one. It came about nine months later when her son was born. And she knew it was part of the same joke because she said, **“‘God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.’ And she said, ‘Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’”**

There is another dimension to this joke that we miss because we don't speak Hebrew. She named her son Isaac and, in Hebrew, Isaac means laughter. She was essentially saying, in a really good way, that her son was the punchline.

People and Their Challenges

And I think that is exactly the kind of laughter that God loves to introduce into our lives – the laughter that comes in the form of people. Because remember this, people always come with their challenges.

Sarah, according to the chronology of Genesis, was about eighty years old at this point of the story. And I know that her great age is meant to highlight the miraculous nature of her pregnancy, but it also introduces an element of enormous challenge, doesn't it?

I am nowhere near approaching the age of eighty. Or at least that's what I keep telling myself every time I look in the mirror. But do you think that at my "young" age I would feel ready to take on the challenge of having a new baby? I don't think so! The time for that seems long past!

If Isaac came into Sarah's life at that point, think of all the change, disruption and inconvenience he would have brought – not to mention the dirty diapers, sleepless nights and anxieties. It would have changed everything about her life, and it would not have been easy. In many ways, that was the biggest joke that God played on her. And she seems to have taken it with good humour.

God's Greatest Joke on the Church

What is the greatest joke that God is playing on the church today? I think it is children. Wherever I go talking to churches these days, what do I hear? Above all I hear an impassioned plea for children and young people. Oh, if only God would give us children and young families, our congregation would be saved.

And I do believe that God is hearing that plea and that God is answering. God is sending children to our congregations. They are showing up in new and unexpected ways and from unexpected places. And those children are bringing us the gift of laughter.

God's Punchline

But I think God also has a punchline in there. I think that God is watching us closely when children show up or even when they visit. God knows very well that when new people, and especially young people join us, they bring us many challenges.

Yes, they will bring laughter, but sometimes we will feel as if that laughter doesn't come at the most appropriate moments. They will certainly bring with them much disruption. There will be noise when we are not used to noise. Children arrive and bring with them the inevitable challenge that they don't know what it is like to be in church, and that it takes them time to learn how to handle it all appropriately. And God is watching us with anticipation and ready to laugh at any discomfort we might show.

You see, God's greatest joke is to give us what we pray and ask for. God loves to see how we actually deal with the answers to our prayers. And so, God will send those answers wrapped up in all kinds of curveballs and tests of our faith.

God gives us the gift of laughter, and thanks be to God who loves us enough to do so!