

HE LAUGHS
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The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:1-6).

A college student I know works at the checkout counter of a local supermarket. One day not long ago an elderly man came through her line. She pointed out that he had Food Perks coming – a chance to take a few dollars off his order – and she asked whether he wanted to use them now or save them for later. The man said, "Just look at me. There's no time to lose. I bought green bananas and that was taking a risk!"

Supermarkets are a great source of material for standup comedy. Everybody eats, so you see a cross section of local humanity there, and people are funny. Some are funny because they have a sense of humor, like this old gentleman, and some are funny because they have no sense of humor – no ironic detachment to see how quirky they really are. The best comedians don't have to make up jokes in order to be funny. They draw their stuff from everyday life. If you have an eye for incongruity, there's plenty to laugh about.

I've always thought it strange that people don't laugh more when they read the Bible. I suppose most people don't read the Bible enough to get the jokes anyway, and when they do read the Bible they don't expect to find much humor in it. People seem to think that the Word of the Lord should always be deadly serious, and of course a good bit of it is quite serious. But we human beings are made in the image of God, which means not that God looks like us but that some of what makes us human is a reflection, however dim and imperfect, of what God is like. Every good thing is a gift from God – it was God's idea first. If we all like to laugh so much, wouldn't it be strange if the God who made us had no sense of humor?

We laugh a lot in our staff Bible study on Tuesday mornings and in our Wednesday afternoon Bible study for everyone who shows up, because the Bible is about people, and people are funny; and because the gospel, like comedy, turns our expectations upside down. People who think religion is just common sense really don't get it. They miss both the tragedy and the comedy of the life of faith.

Take the Old Testament story of Sarah, who doesn't get to the maternity ward until long after she qualifies for Social Security. Few things are more painful than longing for a child who never comes, especially in a time and place where women are valued mostly for their children. Poor Sarah is ninety years old and has long since given up hope of ever having the thing she wants most. Adding insult to injury, her husband, Abraham, has a child through her servant, Hagar, in order to have an heir. Hagar uses her fertility as a not-so-subtle revenge for having to take orders from Sarah. Needless to say, there's tension in Abraham's tent.

But then Sarah has her day. One day some strangers show up out of the desert, and they tell Abraham that his wife is going to have a son. Sarah, listening from inside the tent, laughs out loud because the idea is so ridiculous. Now one of the strangers, whom the Bible calls "the Lord," asks Abraham why Sarah laughed. "No I didn't," Sarah says. "Yes you did," says the stranger. They go back and forth a bit, until the man says, "In due course you will have a son, and you will call him 'Isaac' [which means 'He laughs'], because nothing is too hard for the Lord."

Sure enough, nine months or so later, Sarah has a son, and they call him Isaac. He will become the father of Jacob, whose name will be changed to Israel, so an entire nation will be born out of Sarah's old age. Now

Sarah's friends laugh with her instead of laughing at her. They laugh with her precisely because they used to laugh at her. Who would have thought, after all these years, that Sarah would find such joy?

And the one who laughs last is God. God's own creatures are always telling him what's possible and what is not, acting as though they called the shots. After all these years they still don't get it. Even now we don't get it. We're always trying to set God straight, telling God how to run the universe. From God's perspective, it might be funny having his creatures trying to boss him around, if it wasn't often so tragic.

Still, the Bible says that God laughs, and for some of the same reasons we laugh.

God laughs sometimes out of sheer joy. When Job finally meets God in a whirlwind, God asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth ... when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" In the great creation poem of Genesis, when God looks over each day's work, he says with satisfaction, "It's good!" That's not so different from the times in our own lives when everything is going right, and we're full of joy, and we find ourselves saying, "Life is good!"

God also laughs with us when things turn out well, as they did for Sarah, especially after they haven't gone so well before. Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." If finding the treasures of heaven brings us joy, how much laughter is there among the saints who celebrate with us? Jesus says, "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous who need no repentance." If heaven laughs like that, surely the Lord of heaven is laughing too.

But there's still another sense in which God laughs, according to the Bible. God laughs *with* those who receive God's gifts in joy and gratitude, and love God and their neighbors; but God laughs *at* those who pretend to be greater than they are. God laughs at those who pride themselves in their wealth and power and status, as though these things were their own doing entirely, and not gifts to be used for God's purposes in the world.

Jesus tells the parable of the rich man who has so much stuff he has to build a bigger barn to hold it all; but God says, "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you, and then whose will these things be?" In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus blesses the poor and hungry and crying and despised, saying they will laugh and be satisfied one day. But he says woe to those who are rich and full and complacent. They already have their reward, and their complacency may keep them out of heaven. God laughs *with* the humble who care for others; things will turn out well for them. But God laughs *at* the proud who live for themselves; they will be brought low.

It isn't only individuals that God laughs at. Whole nations are the objects of God's laughter when they puff themselves up and flatter themselves with their wealth and power, if they do not do what is right. "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?" the psalmist asks. "He who sits in the heavens laughs, and the Lord has them in derision." Great nations can supersize human pride. Their power impresses mortals, but the prophets say that to God they are as nothing, like dust on the scales or drops of water in the ocean.

Nothing evokes the scornful laughter of God more than his creatures' pride and pretensions, whether in the hearts of individuals or in the collective vanity of nations. God is King of kings and Lord of lords because even the greatest lords of this earth are small and pitiful by comparison.

To be saved means, among other things, that God laughs with us in the end, not at us.

The scripture says, "The Lord takes pleasure in his people. He adorns the humble with victory." Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Cling to that promise when you grieve and mourn, when you feel alone and abandoned, and life is hard. God hears your cry, and if you trust in God, your day will

come. God will laugh with those who love God, because in the end the drama of life turns out to be a comedy, not a tragedy. The blind see, the lame walk, the poor are fed, the lonely find love, and the dead are raised. There will be joy and laughter when God's kingdom comes.

Now if anyone says, "All this talk of God's laughing is just anthropomorphism, naively attributing human qualities to God," the answer is that something like the opposite is true. Just as we love because he first loved us, so we laugh because God laughed first. Love and laughter are God's ideas. There was joy in heaven over the creation of the world, there is joy when any of us sinners find our way to the kingdom, and in the end God will have the last laugh. All our laughter is an echo of God's own joy.

Jesus becomes like us so that we can become more like God. He laughs, and so will those who love him.