

Trusting God

“LOL”

Genesis 21:1-13

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Laugh Out Loud

For anyone of my generation or older I need to explain what LOL stands for. No, it doesn't stand for *lots of love*. It's part of the texting language of the last few years. If you want to use it to communicate, you text out LOL and everybody knows what you mean. What you mean is “Laugh Out Loud.” Which is to scoff with laughter at someone else's foolish or silly statement or action.

If you noticed, there's a lot of laughter in the Abraham stories. God lets Abe know that he and Sarai will have a child and Abe laughs. It's just too unbelievable. He's in his 90's and she's in her 80's. When God and the angels visit Abraham and Sarai to repeat the promise of a child, Sarai laughs out loud – it's just too unbelievable! She's called out for it, too. “Why did you laugh?” “I didn't laugh!” “Oh, but you did laugh...”

Then almost unexpectedly, the promise is fulfilled. Sarai gives birth to a son and then there's a different kind of laughter filling the air. Isaac's name itself means “*He Laughs...*” It's true and we all know it. One of the most fun things about babies is their laughter.

Sarai laughs about Isaac himself – about the fulfillment of all her dreams in the birth of a son. She delights in his laughter and says, “Everyone who hears about this will laugh with me...”

This isn't LOL laughter – a scoffing at something silly. This is laughter of another sort. It's the laughter of heaven.

What is it about laughter? There are different kinds of it – either a part of God's heart for the world, or not. Let's look at this.

Expensive Laughter

The earlier laughter is what could be called *expensive laughter*. Expensive laughter happens when things have been tough. Life is hard, maybe there's been a set-back or a loss, and, right in the midst of it something strikes you as funny, and you laugh.

Sometimes there's nothing else you can do but laugh. It's real laughter, though it may not be mirth. It's expensive. It's laughter that has cost a lot of your life.

Ever laughed like that? I remember one day in church in Colorado, years ago, when there was a series of mess-ups in worship. The organist started with the wrong song. I had to stop him, and we started over. Then he played the Doxology instead of the Gloria. I had to stop that, too. Then a kid went ballistic and interrupted the beginning of the sermon. Then, right as I got into the middle of things, the electricity just went off – completely off. All I could do was say, “This is getting very interesting!” So we had a good, expensive laugh at the frustrations of the morning.

That's what Abraham and Sarai's laughter is earlier – it's expensive laughter – there was no fulfillment of their hopes – hopes that had been given them by God. When the Lord re-affirms the promise, they laugh.

God notices and accepts this laughter.

God knows the cost of life that so many pay. Sometimes all they can do is laugh after crying about it. It's expensive and God accepts it. It's a form of prayer, don't you think?

Unholy Laughter

Then there's unholy laughter. We're warned about this in the scriptures. It's laughter at other people's expense. Laughter that's designed to mock – to make fun of, to put somebody in their place. It's laughter that destroys. There's a mean streak to it.

Watch out for this kind of laughter. It destroys. God isn't in it. I enjoy comedy as much as anybody. I love a good laugh. But the last few years I've noticed that quite a bit of the comedy we laugh at – especially on T.V. on the late night talk shows is destructive. It demeans others – even to the point of sadness. It's not just that too much of it is crude – though that's a problem too – it's that it's intended to put people down.

There is a Godly humor that intends to help us laugh with others and build people up. Like the reading of the 23rd Psalm this morning. That was beautiful, fun, charming, and humorous – but at no one’s expense.

There’s unholy laughter in this story and it comes from Ishmael – Isaac’s older half-brother, who mocks Isaac with unholy laughter at Isaac’s weaning party. The same verb for laughter is used here, but in a form that turns it from a positive into something negative – even sinister. This indicates that Ishmael does not love Isaac, and has designs that get in the way of God’s will.

Laughter can be unholy and can destroy what God intends to redeem. Make sure we stay away from unholy laughter.

Holy Laughter

But there is Holy Laughter – it’s neither expensive laughter, nor unholy laughter, but something that goes right into the heart of the Gospel. We see it in this story so clearly!

There has been disappointment after disappointment. The lives of Abraham and Sarai and the future of their hopes, centered around God’s promise seem just out of grasp. The promise of descendants is totally out of reach.

Then, it happens. Something impossible – a birth to a couple in their 90’s – brings forth a son. The entire future is restored. The response is holy laughter.

What’s going on here that calls forth such laughter? It’s way beyond the joy of a birth, though that alone could explain it. It’s deeper than that. As O.T. scholar Walter Brueggeman puts it, “Laughter is the Biblical way of receiving a newness that cannot be explained. The newness is sheer gift.”¹

Let’s look at this more closely. There is NO natural way this birth could have taken place. No human ability or power – in that age or this – could bring this birth about. Only the word of the Lord given in a promise fulfilled can bring about this birth. ONLY GOD could do it. God did it. Abraham and Sarai know this and rejoice, leading to the only response that seems right: laughter. Holy laughter.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, Genesis, pp.180-182.

Birth and Laughter

This whole story goes to the heart of God's work of salvation. The only way salvation comes is through God following through on bringing something into being that transforms life. We can't do it. You can't remake your life. You and I can't get rid of sin. Only God can do it. Unless God does it, it isn't going to happen. This is what faith is ALL ABOUT!

Only God can do what needs to be done. And when God does it – it's more like a birth than anything else. Have you ever noticed why there are so many of these stories of babies being born who bring new life in the Bible?

- There's Seth – born to Adam and Even after Abel was murdered by Cain.
- Then there's Isaac.
- Later Samuel, the famous prophet is born to Hannah – in almost the same way as Isaac to Sarai.
- Eventually you get to Zechariah and Elizabeth with John the Baptist
- And finally, to Jesus, born to the virgin, Mary. The biggest surprise of all. But it shouldn't be! God had been preparing the world for the birth of the Son of God for thousands of years before.

It's that birth that then brings in the miracle of spiritual birth for all who believe. It's something only God can do. Listen to this passage from John:

“To all who did receive him (speaking of Christ), who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God. Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a person, but born of God.” (John 1:12-13)

The life of grace, given in the good news of Jesus Christ is more like a birth than anything else because it's something only God can do.

The response is laughter. Holy laughter.

Laughter Follows

I can't help but say, I wish for all of us the freedom of holy laughter – all the time. Sometimes it will be expensive laughter, but still holy. May we never participate in unholy laughter. But may we know the freedom of the laughter that is at the heart of God because of God's work in the world which is happening, even now, even today laughter always follows:

- In the midst of pain and suffering – new life – and then laughter

- In the wake of loss or devastation – follows newness, a birth that only God can bring comes – and laughter follows.
- Into the shallow pursuits of life that so many try to use to fill the emptiness of their souls. God pours his life through Christ and laughter comes out of nowhere.

It's not the laughter of relief or the small joys that come from a few improvements or blessings – but the laughter that is the response to God bringing something out of nothing; of God saving us when we were lost. Of transforming lives that are scattered and sad, or mean and brutish. It's life brought into existence by the power of the Word of God, made flesh in Jesus.

Even now, it amazes me when I think of all that God has done in my own life – in my own family, through all these 'births – spiritual and emotional, relational and real. Right now it makes me smile and I could laugh out loud.

I close today with Psalm 126:

PS 126:1 When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

PS 126:2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

PS 126:3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

PS 126:4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

PS 126:5 Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.

PS 126:6 He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with him.