

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Not Business as Usual, No. 9*

Laughter

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Genesis 21:1-7

My mom and dad didn't subscribe to many magazines as I was growing up. The only two I remember seeing around the house were *Good Housekeeping* and *Reader's Digest*, and I, by far, preferred *Reader's Digest* because the stories and articles were short – which matched my attention span.

Both of those magazines are still around, by the way. *Good Housekeeping* is nearly 135 years old and has a circulation of almost 4.5 million, and *Reader's Digest* has over 10.5 million subscribers. It's the most read paid-subscription magazine in the world.

And it's the one I want to talk about.

In *Reader's Digest*, there was – and still is – a section titled, "Laughter: The Best Medicine." I never really understood that title as a kid. I thought it made no sense.

And to tell you the truth, the longer I've lived, the more I've realized that there are still people in the world who don't understand what that title really means. There are still people who don't know how to laugh – who refuse to laugh. They just take themselves and everything else far too seriously.

The wiser among us, however, realize that, though there are certainly very serious parts to life, the reality is that in order to stay sane, you have to laugh; you have to find reasons to laugh; you have to laugh at yourself, and you have to laugh at our world.

And especially followers of Jesus.

I mean, of course we are a serious people with a serious mission and a serious faith.

But we also need to laugh, and not just for our own sake, but we need to laugh in order to reflect God and His character accurately to our world.

Laughter, you know, is *not* a *consequence* of the *fall*. Laughter and happiness are part of God's created order, which means they are a part of God Himself. And because we are made in His image, we are to be a people who can laugh – who know how to laugh.

Now, not at everything, of course.

The fact is, in recent days, the world has given us few reasons to laugh. But it's in those times especially that it's important for us to find reasons to laugh.

For example, with all the awful news around, you probably didn't hear the news this week that Poland had invaded the Czech Republic? It's true. Polish soldiers got their bearings mixed up and crossed the Czech border and actually occupied a little town there, and detained Czech citizens who were trying to go to church.

It took a while for them to figure out that their directions were wrong, and, in fact, they were on the wrong side of the border. And then everyone laughed about it – called it a minor misunderstanding.

Or how about the guy – Daniel Thorson – who went on a 75-day Buddhist monastic retreat. He cut himself off from all news and communication with the outside world in a remote cabin in northwestern Vermont in early March. And just this week he emerged and tweeted, "So, did I miss anything in the last 75 days?"

Laughter is a medicine that defuses situations, that helps us keep perspective, and in that way, it's a gift from God – a gift that can certainly be *not* business as usual – in a world that is tense and on edge.

At least, it was in Scripture from time to time.

There is probably no place, at least in the Old Testament, that speaks of laughter more than in the Scriptures that surround the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, part of which is our text for today. Genesis 21, verses 1 through 7. You could turn there if you like, or follow along on the screen as I read it for us. Genesis 21, the first seven verses:

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

⁶ Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." ⁷ And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (NIV)

A bit of history here may help us make sense of this.

Back in Genesis 12 – 25 years before this moment, when Abraham was about 75 years old, God promised him that He would make him into a great nation, and despite all manner of missteps and interruptions, Abraham never lost sight of that promise.

Best that he could, Abraham trusted God to keep that word – promise – to him somehow.

But that "how" would be determined by God, and not by any human creativity or manipulation. That is the lesson that Abraham had to learn, and the learning of that lesson involved laughter, but not always the kind that was funny.

We read about the first fit of laughter to come to Abraham in chapter 17 – about 25 years later. There, we're told that when Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him, once again, to confirm His "Great Nation" promise.

"I'm still going to do this, Abraham." That was God's message.

And Abraham still believed, but apparently, through the years, he'd thought God may have needed a little help.

You see, at this point, it had been 13 years since God had last spoken to Abraham.

Why? Because 13 years before, something happened: the birth of Ishmael.

Sarah was, apparently, unable to conceive, and now, she was long past child-bearing years. So, to her, having a child was hopeless.

Redeeming her value as a wife, in that culture – that was hopeless.

That whole “Great Nation” promise? Fulfilling that was hopeless.

So, Sarah had this idea – have Abraham sleep with her servant, Hagar, in order to have a son by Hagar. And in that child, there would be hope for the future.

And it worked. A son, Ishmael, was born.

But after that happened, God waited 13 years, one of the longest periods of divine silence Abraham ever experienced, which – at least John Calvin thought – suggests that God wasn’t too happy with Sarah’s idea.

But, finally, God does speak again to Abraham of two big ideas:

First is God’s idea of circumcision, which – if you’re male especially – is no laughing matter. Abraham did not laugh at this. He actually seemed to take that in stride, as if to say, “OK, God – I may not fully get why that’s important to you, but it’ll happen.”

But the second thing that God said – that was what really threw Abraham.

God said, “I will bless you and your 90-year-old wife and will give you a son by her, such that she will be the mother of nations.”

At this – the idea of Sarah having a baby – Scripture says, “Abraham fell facedown and laughed.”

Why did he laugh? Well, Abraham understood basic biology. He knew himself and he knew his wife, and so he laughed at the thought of it – the incredibility of it, the unbelievability of it.

“Boy, God, you have a great sense of humor. I mean, I know you *do have* a sense of humor. After all, you created anteaters and dugongs and blob fish, so I know you have a sense of humor. But this is really a good one – that Sarah and I would have a baby?! Now? How can we push a stroller and a walker at the same time? You must be kidding!”

Abraham laughed.

But God was not kidding. And God did not laugh. In fact, bouncing right off Abraham’s reaction, God goes right on, and tells Abraham that the name of this son to be born would be Isaac, which means “He laughs.”

You see, when you name something, that makes it more real, doesn’t it?

When you don’t feel well and you go to the doctor and the doctor says, “Oh you have – this.” That may be good or bad news, but the naming of it brings clarity.

If you raise animals, and you sort of make one a pet, it’s a little harder to eat a cow or a chicken that you’ve given a name to...there’s something about the name that brings a familiarity.

It’s the same principle here. God’s act of naming this child to come brings the child into an actuality that Abraham could not or dared not see before.

I think that’s why God named him.

And the name God gave him? God chose the name Isaac for at least two reasons. First, so that every time Abraham calls this son-to-come’s name, he’ll remember that God did, in fact, do something utterly humanly impossible. God did something that Abraham himself didn’t think God could do.

So, both Isaac’s life and Isaac’s name taught Abraham something about God’s power and trustworthiness.

But the second reason for Isaac’s name is to remind Abraham of God’s favor and blessing upon him. You see, even though Abraham laughed at the idea, the name Isaac – because God chose it – means that God was pleased with Abraham and with this whole plan – this whole arrangement.

This whole episode here speaks loudly of the character of God. It tells us how God takes pleasure in surprising those who are faithful to Him and doing things – even shocking things – which are supernatural, not-business-as-usual things in their lives. God loves finding people, like Abraham, who simply take God at His word and walk in trust. They don’t always have understanding, and sometimes the things they do look crazy to the world around, and sometimes they make mistakes, but regardless of all that, they just keep on believing and trusting God.

In those kinds of relationships, God, you might say, lets loose a bit, just as you or I would when we know we’re in a relationship of trust.

In this case here, God is giving Abraham a living reminder of his own doubt, and yet, at the same time, a reminder of God’s pleasure in him and patience with him.

This whole episode here just shouts of the immense grace of God – and of His personality and of His humor.

I think God is saying to Himself, “Ha – watch this. I’m going to name this boy the very thing that reminds Abraham that I can easily do whatever he thinks I can’t.”

It’s not laughter at anyone’s expense, you see? Everyone’s laughing here, because everyone is being blessed. Abraham and Sarah by a son, and God the Father by Abraham’s obedience and trust.

Of course, there is more laughter in this account.

Sarah laughs when she’s told about the plan for her to have a son, which I’d imagine any 90-year-old woman would – either that or faint!

And then finally here in chapter 21, when the promised son is born, there is laughter.

I’d imagine at the first sign of pregnancy, Abraham and Sarah laughed. “Could this be true? Is what I’m feeling real?”

Do 90-year-olds get morning sickness?

I’d imagine when Sarah’s body started to change and the baby started to show, there was laughter again.

And then at the birth itself, right when God had promised, there was laughter in their home and in their whole community, because Laughter, himself, joined their family.

Now, there was heartache in all this too, and it was not handled well.

Abraham and Sarah presumed that the arrival of one child meant the rather heartless dismissal of another, yet

God cared for that situation as well. God had plans – a destiny – for Ishmael, so long as Ishmael followed God.

But the path to God’s “Great Nations” promise to Abraham would come through Isaac – that was simply the way God wanted it. It was neither Abraham’s nor is it ours to necessarily understand or even to agree with.

It was Isaac who was the miracle child. It was the birth of Isaac that taught Abraham to trust in God’s ways and not lean on his own understanding – to force things to happen.

It was Isaac who brought laughter to his family. It was Isaac who brought laughter to God, and it was Isaac, who was laughter himself, who pointed the way to the future in a time that was otherwise full of hopelessness.

I saw a news story about a recent survey conducted by the American Psychological Association. They polled 5,000 American adults, and one of the findings was that 72% of them believe this is the lowest point in the history of our nation that they’ve been alive to see.

Between the Covid sicknesses, the state of our politics, the economic turmoil, the rampant immorality, the racial issues and just the division among us as a people, the title of the news story could have been, “America, The Land of the Worried and the Home of the Hopeless.”

What is God’s future for our nation? Is it greatness or is it destruction? We don’t really know.

God has been patient with us, certainly. But we dare not presume upon His patience.

Unless we return to Him as a nation...apart from another Great Awakening, I’m afraid it’s only a matter of time before He lets us have what a rapidly growing number of our people seem to be asking for...which is a nation without God.

That is nothing less than self-destruction...and that is the very definition of hopeless.

And yet even now, God is looking for people like Abraham – people who may not understand everything about these days and times, but who are willing to trust God for what may seem to be impossible promises.

To those people who know their future is with Him, no matter what – no matter the mistakes they may make, to all who will follow God as best they can – which means in our day, to receive and follow His Son, Jesus Christ, to all who will do that, God will not only give peace and assurance and guidance, God will also give laughter.

And God Himself will laugh with us. He will take great joy in us, and He will provide for us and protect us from ourselves. And He will do miraculous things in our lives. And He will use us and our families, even with our imperfections. He will use us in one way or another, to make a great nation, to populate His Kingdom, to be His people.

No matter what God has in store for our nation, God wants to know, today, if you and I will trust Him.

Will we trust Him as Abraham did?

Given that this is Father’s Day and all of Abraham’s story revolves in one way or another around fatherhood, I pose the question to you men in particular: Will you trust God as Abraham did?

Will you trust Him when you don’t understand?

Will you trust Him even through mistakes that you make?

Will you trust Him to use you to change the world in His way and time?

Will you trust Him to bring laughter in even what may seem to be hopeless days?

If you will, why don’t you tell Him that? Affirm to God, on this Father’s Day, that it’s your desire and goal to trust Him with the trust of Abraham. That would bring joy and laughter to God’s heart.

Let’s take a moment to let you respond to Him – to whatever God is doing in your heart today.

[Silence]

Father, help us to trust you...

to trust you like Abraham...

to trust when we don’t understand...

to trust you with such intimacy that we might laugh with you...

that we might enjoy your presence...

that we might be a source of joy to you always...

and that we might be a source of sure hope to our, in many ways, hopeless world.

In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

If you are not a follower of Jesus, would you consider following Him? He knows the best course for your life and He will lead all who will follow to a place that is full of goodness and grace and joy and even laughter – laughter in even hopeless days.

And if you are a follower of Jesus today – no matter what may be happening in the world around us, may you see and experience the laughter – the joy – that God the Father has in you and for you.

Benediction:

By the power of God’s Holy Spirit, may all of us who name the name of Christ go from this place and be to our world what Abraham was to his:

a follower of God,

a receiver of grace,

a maker of mistakes,

an enjoyer of God’s miracles,

May we be people who can laugh with God, and through it all, be shining lights of hope to our world.