
IS ANYTHING TOO WONDERFUL FOR GOD?

GENESIS 18:10–15, 21:1–7

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 18, 2023

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One evening a little girl and her parents were sitting around the table eating supper. The little girl said, ‘Daddy, you’re the boss, aren’t you? Her Daddy smiled real big, and he was so pleased and said yes, baby. And then the little girl continued, “That’s because Mommy put you in charge, right?” It might be Father’s Day but I’m clear Mommy is the boss!

It’s so good to *laugh with* each other. The wisdom of Proverbs tells us that a cheerful heart is good medicine. The Mayo Clinic says the benefits of laughing are no joke whatsoever. Laughter can stimulate many organs, activate and relieve your stress response, soothe tension, improve your immune system, relieve pain, increase personal satisfaction, and improve your mood. It’s so good to *laugh with* others.

But I know that the world we live in is no laughing matter. As the skies turn to brownish red due to fires in Canada and we’re warned to stay inside. When young people can’t even celebrate a high school graduation without fear of gun violence. When scandals haunt our sociopolitical landscape. It would appear that life is no laughing matter. Yet God laughs in the Bible. Generally, God’s laughter is derisive, *laughing at*, not with, the wicked like in Psalm 2 where the kings of the earth set themselves against God, but we hear that God sits in the heavens, drinks some sweet tea, and laughs.

There is not only the phenomenon of *laughing with*, but there is *laughing at*. To its extreme, there is a cruel laughter at the death of enemies, a Joker kind of smile of joy that’s painted over one’s face at the destruction of others. Laughter can be bitter or cynical when laughing at.

Initially, Sarah only laughs with herself and no one else when she overhears that she’ll have a son even at her ripe old age. It’s a laugh of disbelief, a laugh of incredulity. She *laughs at* a promise that comes from God. It seems totally absurd to her. “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” Earlier in Genesis, Abraham falls on his face and laughs about this news as well. “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” I can think of other things you might want to be doing at those ripe ages other than having a newborn baby.

Sarah and Abraham *laugh at* what they deem to be impossible. They laugh in disbelief because they are used to their comfortable status quo lives and what has been for all these years. They laugh because they can’t believe that anything will change at this stage in life and they’re just waiting to die. Little do they know that their laughter is already a crack that opens up a closed heart and mind to an incredible future. As songwriter Leonard Cohen reminds us—“there’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” That’s how life gets in! That’s how God gets in. In their apparently incongruous situation—the paradox of being old yet being told Sarah will give birth—is right where God meets them and often where God meets us—in the tense times. You’re never too old for God to work in your life. Our perceived limitations—our age, our gender, our race, our class, our education, our health—do not limit God. Is anything too wonderful (too hard) for God?

To abolish slavery wasn’t too hard for God. Tomorrow, June 19th will mark the 158th anniversary of Juneteenth. It commemorates the day in 1865 — two years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation — when federal troops reached the remaining enslaved African Americans in Galveston, TX, to free them. Some call this day America’s Second Independence Day.

And you should know that even in the historical context of human slavery, there was also laughter. Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston tells the story of High John de Conquer. He “was not a natural man in the beginning. First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of *laughter* and song. Then the whisper put on flesh. His footsteps sounded across the world in a low but musical rhythm as if the world he walked on

was a singing-drum... High John de Conquer was a man in full and had come to live and work on the plantations, and all the slave folks knew him in the flesh. The sign of this man was *a laugh*, and his singing-symbol was a drum-beat...It was an inside thing to live by. It was sure to be heard when and where the work was the hardest, and the lot the most cruel. It helped the slaves endure.”

“He had come from Africa. He came walking on the waves of sound. Then he took on flesh after he got here.” High John enjoyed “playing his tricks of making a way out of no-way. Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. Winning the jack pot with no other stake but *a laugh*. Fighting a mighty battle without outside-showing force and winning his war from within.”

There are many stories about how the enslaved received freedom through High John. “The best one,” according to Hurston, “deals with a plantation where the work was hard, and Old Massa mean...So, naturally, Old John de Conquer was around that plantation a lot.

“What we need is a song,” he told the people after he had figured the whole thing out. ‘It ain’t here, and it ain’t no place I knows of as yet. Us better go hunt around. This has got to be a particular piece of singing.”

“But the slaves were scared to leave. They knew what Old Massa did for any slave caught running off.”

High John told them “to get ready to go while he went off to get something for them to ride on.’ He told them to get dressed and “to get out their musical instruments so they could play music on the way...John went off for a minute...[He came] back, riding on a great black crow. The crow was so big that one wing rested on the morning, while the other dusted off the evening star...they all mounted on.”

They traveled to Hell looking for “a song that would whip Old Massa’s earlaps down. The song was not in Hell.” And so they decided to visit Heaven.

“..The gates swung wide for them, and they went in. They were bathed, robed, and given new and shining instruments to play on. Guitars of gold, and drums, and cymbals and wind-singing instruments. They walked up Amen Avenue and down Hallelujah Street, and found with delight that Amen Avenue was tuned to sing bass and alto. The west end was deep bass, and the east end alto. Hallelujah Street was tuned for tenor and soprano, and the two promenades met right in front of the throne and made harmony by themselves. You could make any tune you wanted to by the way you walked...Old Maker called them up before His great work-bench and made them a tune and put it in their mouths. It had no words. It was a tune that you could bend and shape in most any way you wanted to fit the words and feelings that you had. They learned it and began to sing.”

Just about that time, Old Massa began to call them and “Heaven went black before their eyes...There was everything just like they had left it...and Massa was doing the hollering.” John de Conquer told the enslaved “Don’t pay what he say no mind. You know where you got something finer than this plantation and anything it’s got on it, put away...Us got all that, and he don’t know nothing at all about it. Don’t tell him nothing. Nobody don’t have to know where us gets our pleasure from...They all began to *laugh* and grabbed their hoes...Aunt Diskie [one of the enslaved] *laughed and hugged herself with secret laughter*. ‘Us got all the advantage and Old Massa think he got us tied!”

“The crowd broke out singing as they went off to work. The day didn’t seem hot like it had before. Their gift song came back into their memories in pieces, and they sang about glittering new robes and harps, and the work flew...”

When freedom finally came for the enslaved, they still had their song and laughter and sometimes you have to laugh to keep from crying. Life can be no laughing matter, as in this setting, but laughter in this context was a form of resistance to the inhumane and the insane, and plain old evil. You can *laugh against* something, and laughter can be a subversive practice that interrupts systems of oppression. You laugh against that which says something is impossible like the freeing of the enslaved. You laugh not because something is funny but because you have faith! A faith that says, ‘I’ll keep laughing because nothing is too hard for God.’ A faith that says, ‘Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel and why not every man?’ A faith that says, “I’m gonna trust in the Lord till I die.” A faith that says, “Got any rivers you think are uncrossable? Got any mountains you cannot tunnel through? God specializes in things thought impossible. God will do

for you what no other power can do.” Laughter recognizes that some things only God knows, and some things are best left up to God and not us. Laughter can be the sound of hope in hellish circumstances. Laughter can be a sound of God in our lives. Is anything too wonderful for God?

According to Bible scholar Walter Brueggeman, “If we say, ‘Yes, some things are too hard, impossible for God’ then God is not yet confessed as God. We have not conceded radical freedom to God. We have determined to live in a closed universe where things are stable, reliable, and hopeless. If, on the other hand, the question is answered, ‘No, nothing is impossible for God,’ that is an answer which accepts God’s freedom that the self and the world are fully entrusted to God and to no other. The question must not be given this answer lightly or easily. The way (our text) hopes we will answer is to yield utterly to this gracious One.” What we answer is no laughing matter because how we answer determines how we live. Is anything too wonderful for God?

Some of us won’t laugh for any reason because we like everything controlled, decent and in order, and just how we like it and according to what we know. We desire control more than even conversion to the unspeakable joy of God. We don’t want anything unexpected, and Spirit-filled to roll up inside of us, out of us, without our permission, without our total comprehension. We won’t laugh because we are fixated on what we see and only what we can imagine on our intellectual horizon.

But God has a funny bone, a manner of bringing us newness and freedom and unforeseen joy in places we’ve never imagined like in prisons or in the ICU or psychiatric wards. Laughter broadens our horizons to expect the unexpected, to embrace uncertainty while tearing down our citadels of certitude, to be open to where the Spirit might be blowing, transcending our frames of reference, expanding our parameters of reason and common sense, reminding us that we are not God. As one of my pastor mentors said many years ago to me an undergrad, “God is God all by Godself and God don’t need nobody else!”

So don’t be afraid to laugh and experience the impossible break loose in the world and in your lives. The story of Sarah and Abraham calls us to welcome the laughter of God into our lives. Like Sarah, we may think that we are not suitable or ready for God’s action, use, or blessing. But we learn that God has *laughter for* us. God is not laughing at or against us but has *laughter for* us.

Just as God promised, Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in their old age and the son’s name was Isaac. And guess what Isaac’s name means? “He laughs.” “Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” The laughter that God gives to Sarah is a laughter that is unanticipated, free, and trusts and surrenders to a God with whom anything is possible. God wants to give you what you think is impossible. Is anything too wonderful for God? How can it be when even a Crucified One reigns?

As one prayer notes, “Lord, to laugh in the midst of trial and to rejoice in the darkest valley is another way of saying, ‘Our hope is in you.’ For me but particularly for my wife, Gail, rainbows have given hope. When she gave one of her kidneys to her younger brother in 1998, they were putting her on a gurney about to roll her to surgery when Gail looked out the window and saw a rainbow in the sky. It was as if God was promising that everything was going to be alright. Ever since that moment, rainbows have been an important thread throughout her (and my) life. For our wedding reception, we had already planned to make our first dance, Stevie Wonder’s ‘Ribbon in the Sky,’ but even before our reception, as we pulled into the parking lot after the wedding ceremony, there were people running up to our car, calling out, ‘Gail, look there’s a rainbow in the sky.’ And fast forward to our arrival at Duke before I even officially started my job here. One Sunday afternoon, we met Maya Angelou in my office before her talk to first year students, which she did for over 20 years. We weren’t planning on staying for her talk because of another event but I’m glad we did. Her topic that afternoon was ‘rainbows in the cloud.’ God was saying that everything was going to be alright. We still smile and laugh at the wonder of God when we think about rainbows. Is anything too wonderful for God? N. O.