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When God Makes You Laugh

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The *Today Show* identified some of the best dad jokes, in honor of Fathers' Day.

What has four wheels and flies? A garbage truck.

What did the girl say to her fingers? I'm counting on you.¹

These jokes bring groans from a spouse while teens roll their eyes, or at best a snicker to mask their embarrassment if any of their friends are in ear shot.

The TV series, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* recently ended. It chronicled the travails of a female, stand-up comic who makes her way to stardom in the 1950s and '60s – wearing the decades best fashions. Midge Maisel spills the beans on the tawdriness of her divorce, never fails to mention her ex-husband's blunders, and their collective, Jewish family dramas.

Do you prefer this version of comedy, another's self-deprecating humor, laughing at their life because it mimics your own?

Maybe you appreciated the *The Banshees of Inisherin*, the recent Academy Award nominee. Just this side of macabre, this dark comedy delves into the horror of one man would rather mutilate himself than maintain a friendship with another, who is just like him. However tragic, it presents

¹ Sarah Lemire, "221 best dad jokes to tickle your family's funny bone," *The Today Show*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.today.com/life/dad-jokes-rcna27325>.

Irish Civil War of 1923 as comedic when the Irish preferred to killed one another rather than coexist on their island-nation.

Humor puts our unspoken vulnerableness into full view. These insecurities, fears, and shame pivot between tragedy and heartbreak or a vivacious outcome with comedy. Recall all those situations when someone says, “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.”

Humor brings laughter of equally varied sounds and shapes. There is the shoulder shaking “ha-ha-ha.” A snort. The behind-the-hand church giggles. When solemnity is called for and those giggles begin, my experience tells you they are hard to suppress.

Then there’s a full belly laugh, the kind that leaves your face hurting. The greatest laugh of all – a child’s laugh. With reckless abandon, the very young welcome the absurdity of life for that brief time while immune to humiliation.

Laughter brings relief, kind of like a good cry. The physical act of laughing shakes lose all the nameless emotions of anxiety, anger, fear, and fatigue. The surprise of a good laugh feels like someone pushed your reset button.

Our English translations of scripture’s original languages often mask the embedded humor of wordplay, made-up city names, or non-sequiturs between two people. All our reverence for scripture as *the-Word-of-God*,

and I don't diminish its holiness, might shield us from the intentional humor.

Yet, if God created us in God's own image, shouldn't we expect wisdom and wit? A tongue in cheek message to jolt us from our staid ways? A blessing of light-heartedness or just downright silliness? Remember, God created kittens to wrestle and baby goats to jump. They're funny.

Today's story explores an impromptu dinner party that gives way to humor. It showcases God's ongoing act of creating through us and for us: hospitality, hope and humor.

A bit of context. The Book of Genesis describes the moment God breathes *the people of God* into being when he tells a man called Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

God promises a legacy as numerous as the stars in the sky. The only flaw is that this eighty-year-old and his geriatric wife never produced an heir. They abandoned that dream decades ago.

Was this sick humor?

Of course not. After that first meeting, God continues to speak to Abraham. Before we hear of another encounter, please pray with me.

Dear God,

We bar the door to anything that might disrupt our tidy lives. Even your presence. Blow through these words that we see ourselves in Abraham and Sarah, that we welcome you into our lives. Teach us creation's essence through hospitality, humor, and hope. Amen.

Genesis 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground.

³He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant."

So, they said, "Do as you have said."

⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes."

⁷Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.”

¹⁰Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?”

¹³The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.”

¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. The LORD said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

God promised to build a mighty nation upon this childless couple and then waited. Abraham and Sarah waited. Scripture claims twenty-four years transpires between the moment God blesses Abraham and appearing in the desert heat to say, “oh, wait one more year.”

To put this in perspective, 24 years ago was 1999. Twenty-four years ago, we'd never heard phrases like 9-11 or Zoom. Smartphones and Google maps had yet to ease our lives.

Twenty-four years marks an entirely different phase of human life, even for those who live close to the 100-year mark.² For Abraham and Sarah, as each day ticked by, their doubts grew, with fewer and fewer days ahead without this promised child.

Rather than retreat from life, when Abraham sees three visitors approaching, he extends hospitality. He promises a sip of water and morsel of food. Then he hurries. The story uses a word for “hurry” four times. He hurries to produce a Bedouin feast, far more than offered or expected.

Abraham exemplifies the virtue of hospitality. Any listener to this story at the time would know and practice this ancient custom when they encountered strangers in the desert. Unlike the hospitality of today, with Martha Stewart-like entertaining that expects the font on the invitation to coordinate with the center piece and napkin fold. Before the advent of restaurants, rest stops and inns, everyone offered travelers – including complete strangers – the basic needs of life. A host generously gives to someone without expecting that particular traveler might ever reciprocate.

² Scott Hozee, “Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)”, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, June 11, 2023, Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7) - Center for Excellence in Preaching (cepreaching.org).

Those ancient Israelites who would have heard and told this story commonly accepted this as primary evidence of civilized living. Part of the moral fabric of life.

Today, such hospitality feels radical. People don't need us, or so we think. And we'd rather not open our home to expose our vulnerabilities. Maybe for this reason, so many of us shy away from including anyone at our dinner tables who was not raised at the table as family or friend of family.

When we hear this story, we can only wonder, when was the last time we set a place for someone we'd never met?

More commonly, when a stranger knocks, fears rise.

That's when this story pivots. Ignoring any vulnerability, Abraham opened himself and gave the best of himself to the stranger at the door.

Hospitality makes room for hope. God tells them to expect a son ... in a year.

Sarah laughs.

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann writes: "Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained. The newness is sheer gift—underived, unwarranted."

She laughed not in God's face, but to herself. She laughed not out of arrogance, but out of a broken heart, out of a lifelong disappointment that had taught her not to expect too much from life. Her hopelessness, not pride seeded her inability to believe God's impossible promise.

In many ways, life has been a nightmare, at least since that day Abraham uprooted them after his nighttime, star-gazing folly with God. She was not a rebel, but a realist. To conceive a child at her age was dad joke, a stand-up routine, and tragic comedy all in one. Funny. Not funny.

When God confronted her laughter, she doesn't shake her fist. She cowers, and lies, but she doesn't keep laughing as an unbeliever would. God knows that. That's why God responds to her unbelieving laughter not with fire and brimstone, but with truth and grace. "Yes, you did laugh." That's the truth. You can't fool God.

Let me pause here in Sarah's story. Everyone whose desire for children has been squashed with infertility knows her anger and fear. They know the sorrow, the nosy questions, and unwelcomed advice. This story tears at the heart for both mother and father, then and now.

In the Ancient Near East, life depended upon children. Lots of them. Children provided essential labor to support the household. As they grew, children funded the original social security by tending elderly relatives. Children ensured life continued. Scripture repeats, generation after

generation, the stories of women unable to conceive: Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachael in Genesis alone.

And generation after generation, scripture tells stories of God creating new life in these closed wombs. All these stories of infertility symbolize God doing the impossible when we think all hope is gone. God places the hope for all creation into our daily lives, our bodies, our willingness to dedicate our lives to someone and something bigger.

Under the oaks of Mamre, Abraham and Sarah cleared the necessary space to make room in their lives for some strangers. That is what God did for all of us in the beginning. God made room for a whole universe of creatures through whom God continues creates as effortlessly as in the very beginning.

Sarah and Abraham conceive their son in laughter. His name, Isaac, even means laughter, so that every time we hear his name, Isaac, we remember, with hope, that God often fulfills God's plans by making a mockery of our narrow human plans. At a glimmer of hope long concealed, laughter is the sound that points us from our aging toil to a fresh beginning.³

And centuries and kingdoms later, after those who bore God's own image wandered away or closed their doors, God again set out to make room for the wayward prodigals to come home. God's son tells the story of a

³ Joel S. Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," *Interpretation: Reading the Bible Today*, October 2000, p363-375

prodigal whose father welcomed him home by hurrying to prepare a feast with a fatted calf – just as Abraham welcomed God. And that same son assures us that God is still making room for us. “In my father’s house, there are many rooms. And I will go and prepare one of them for each of you.” The joke is on us, when fear dominates, and our sense of possibilities collapse. The joke is on us when we feel entitled to our plans, our dreams, our rightful share. Then God knocks on the door. The joke is on us when the addict enters recovery and stays sober with strength we never imagined. It is the laughter of estranged families reuniting. It is joy from justice long denied becoming a reality and entire communities dance and sing.

I hope you will drag out those long-held dreams that you hide in fear or shame because the joke is on us to ever doubt God’s ability to do the impossible. For God even laughs at death. God created us as very good and wants the very best for us...comedy, not tragedy. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Not in this creation, my friends. It all begins with hospitality.



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