“Holy, Hopeful Laughter”

Genesis 18:11-15; 21:1-7

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Amused by the requests he found himself making of his children, Nathan Ripperger decided to have a little fun.

He was raising five young boys, so he had a lot of material to work with.

He decided to write down those funny statements and share them with others.

But not in some mundane like a text to his family or a Facebook post.

Ripperger, a graphic designer, created these terrific images to go along with those funny sayings and he created a website where he posted them.

The images went viral and led to him publishing them in a book.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here are a few examples of things Ripperbeger has said to his children:

“Put it down! Asparagus is not a weapon!”

“This is why I told you you could not take your sandwich into the bathtub”

“Why is there a toilet seat on my coffee table?”

“Honey, please don’t lick the toaster”

And my personal favorite:

“Did you put syrup on the dog?”

If you let your imagination wander, you can picture these scenarios where his kids do bizarre things and he has to tell them to stop, or simply wonder why they do what they do.

Like lick the toaster.

If you have children, or grandchildren, or have just spent time with children, you may have found yourself saying some pretty ridiculous things to them.

It sort of comes with the territory.

Their young minds are not yet developed enough to understand why certain behavior is not okay or not safe.

And so parents find themselves saying some pretty bizarre things to their children.

Oftentimes those things are humorous, like the statements Ripperger published in his book.

Do you suppose God ever laughs when speaking to us?

Do you think God makes a statement toward us and then finds them pretty ridiculous?

There seems to be plenty of material for laughter in this exchange we see between God and Sarah and Abraham.

A while before, God had told Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of many generations.

That their ancestors would outnumber the stars.

But then a bit of time passed. Sarah and Abraham got old.

By the time God revisited the topic, Sarah was 90 and Abraham was nearing 100.

At this point they began to wonder if that promise was still true.

Wondering if they would indeed have children.

They may have given up on the idea, thinking themselves too old.

Sort of out of the blue, God visits them at their tent.

Using the disguise of three men, God went to deliver some news.

Abraham provides hospitality for these men, while Sarah lingers at the entrance eavesdropping on the conversation.

It was not proper etiquette for a woman to present at such a social gathering.

One of the guests asks where Sarah is and Abraham says she’s just inside the tent.

The guest, sort of nonchalantly, says, “We’ll be back in a bit and by that time your wife shall bear a son.”

Abraham had already heard this news, which we learn about in chapter 17.

But for some reason he doesn’t tell Sarah, so this is the first time she hears it.

And how does she react?

She laughs!

By herself in that tent, she laughs at this news from this stranger, not knowing it was God saying these things.

She laughs as she looks at her paper-thin skin, wrinkled and aged with time.

Perhaps she thinks it would be ridiculous to raise a child at this point in life.

Her energy is not what it used to be.

She laughs as she remembers those years of hot flashes and hormonal swings.

She’s already gone through menopause, the change of life.

So bearing a child seems physically impossible.

She laughs as she thinks about all of those years of waiting and hoping for a child.

She went to extreme measures, even offering her slave Hagar as a surrogate.

But that was not what God had in mind.

We don’t know exactly what was going through Sarah’s mind as she heard this news.

But we know that she laughed at the idea of it.

She laughed, not knowing that this was God speaking at that tent.

Not knowing that this strangers words were indeed true.

She had waited all this time to have a child, so it seems this laughter is actually a holy, hopeful laughter.

One ingrained with that longing for God’s promise to be true.

That she would indeed become a mother.

But it was a laughter filled with doubt.

Suddenly God speaks up.

Sarah now realizes it was God all along, being hosted by them at their tent.

It was God who told them they would bear a child in their old age.

Sarah is still hiding in the tent, so God asks Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Did she not believe me? Is there anything too wonderful, too difficult for me to accomplish?

He goes on to say once more that Sarah would have a son.

That the promise would be fulfilled.

Sarah pops out from the tent and says “No, No. I didn’t laugh!”

She lies to God.

She fears what God might do because she had laughed.

Maybe she thought God’s mind would be changed and take back the promise.

Maybe she thought God would punish her for her disbelief.

Out of fear and trembling, she lies to God.

God’s only response is “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

But there’s no condemnation in that response.

No punishment for Sarah’s laughter.

Simply an observation of what she did.

Perhaps God was struck by Sarah’s laughter.

Perhaps God was reminded of Abrahams laughter the first time he was told they would have a child.

Perhaps God was taken aback by his children’s inability to believe.

That they couldn’t believe the creator of the universe, the one who put the stars in their place and crafted every grain of sand, could give them a child in their old age.

As the father of Abraham and Sarah, it seems God was making a ridiculous statement.

One worthy of an illustration and placement in a book like Ripperger’s:

“You are going to have a child at 90 years old, Sarah” it would read.

Just like any other parent, God had to make a pretty ridiculous statement to his children.

Because really, it is ridiculous to think of two very old people having a child.

Is it possible that God laughed with Sarah and with Abraham as they laughed at this notion?

That maybe God saw the absurdity through their limited perspective?

We certainly don’t see any condemnation or anger in God’s response.

What we do see is a fulfillment of the promise made.

Jumping over to chapter 21, Isaac is born to Sarah.

God’s promise comes through.

Even though Sarah laughed, and lied and doubted.

God’s promise comes through.

The boy is born and Abraham names him Isaac, which means laughter.

It’s almost like Abraham and Sarah are sharing an inside joke with God by going with that name.

It’s like Abraham says “Hey God, remember that one time when we laughed at you? Thinking you were ridiculous for claiming we’d have a child? Well get this, we’ve named our child “laughter” to remind us of that moment. That moment when I laughed out of shock, and when Sarah laughed out of surprise.”

Abraham and Sarah have a good sense of humor about the whole situation.

Now that a son has indeed been born to them in their old age, just as God had promised.

We are often like Sarah.

We laugh at the promises God makes.

We think they’re ridiculous and impossible.

We doubt and question.

When God promises that we’ll never be alone, we laugh in frustration as the burden of loneliness overwhelms us.

When God sends that rainbow and promises that never again will the earth be destroyed by disaster, we laugh in confusion when hurricanes and tsunamis devastate.

When God promises that Jesus will return, we laugh in embarrassment as atheists ask us where he is, 2000 years after he left.

Like Sarah, we laugh at those promises, because no other response suffices.

When our hope of a promise fulfilled fades, we don’t know what else to do but laugh.

When we start to doubt the plans God has for us, we can look back at Sarah and Abraham.

Remember that they were beyond childbearing years, yet God gave then a child.

They thought it was too late for God to follow through with that promise.

How often do we experience this fear?

That God has forgotten about us?

That the plans God has for us have an expiration date, or that God’s mind will change because we laugh and doubt and question?

Isaac being born to Sarah offers us a reminder that God’s promises are everlasting.

That God indeed has plan for each of us.

And Sarah’s story reminds us that God doesn’t condemn us when we laugh at his plans.

It’s almost like God welcomes this exchange of questioning and doubting and even laughing at plans.

It’s part of what makes our relationship with God more personal and connected.

Laughing over the seemingly absurd things God has in store for us draws us nearer to God.

The story of Sarah having Isaac in her old age reminds us that God works on a different timetable than we do.

God doesn’t always act when we think God should act.

And it isn’t always in the way we think God should act.

But we can trust that in the end, God will come through, acting in our best interest.

God will keep those promises made to us.

Promises to love us and care for us and see us through to the end.

Because we trust and know that God is at the center of it all. Amen.

1. http://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/did-you-put-syrup-on-the-dog?bffb&utm\_term=4ldqpgp#.wg3MN0op2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)