

## God Gets the Last Laugh

a sermon by David Roquemore

First Presbyterian Church, Newton

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Genesis 18: 1-15

So one day, the Lord God walks up to Abraham's tent. Of course, old Abraham does not know it is the Lord God; he just sees three men. Nonetheless, even three travelers get certain welcoming actions from Abraham. The middle east is good at this. Abraham asks them to sit under the tree, in the shade, and he runs and gives Sarah some instructions:

Hey Sarah, even though you are ninety-something years old, please do the following. Mix up and knead and let rise and knead again and bake some cakes for these visitors. I mean, this is a lot of work he assigns her – I'm just saying, from a woman's point of view this visit was a huge amount of effort. Then Abraham goes and gets a calf and slaughters it, while the men get the fire going. He fixes barbecue for the visitors. He'd said, "let me get you a drink of water," but he fixes a feast. Then Abraham sits in the shade and talks with the visiting men while Sarah does all this work with the cakes.

Along and along the men say, or is it God: by the way Abraham, when I come back next year, you will have a son. A baby son. Abraham protests that "I'm too old. Sarah is too old to have a child." For her part, Sarah is in the tent listening, and she laughs out loud! And God says, oh no you are not too old. Yes you will have a child – named Isaac, or, "Laughter" – because you laughed.

This is quite a promise. God loves doing this – he gives his promises to the most unlikely people, all through scriptures. There is this one. Then Isaac has two sons, and God chooses the younger one as the heir of the promises, despite his rascally behavior. An elder said to me once, “If God can love a son-of-a-gun like Jacob, there is hope for me!” Jacob has all these children, twelve sons, and then God chooses Joseph to become the ruler in Egypt. God provides all the way along the way. He chooses Moses the murderer to lead the people and get the law. Years later King David’s grandmother comes from Moab, across the Jordan, and marries Boaz, and starts the line that produces the king. All the way, God chooses the unlikely one to fulfill the promises.

Sarah gets tired and decides to make the promise work out by giving Abraham her maid: have a child with her. This is strange to us, but not so unusual in the ancient world. Abraham is a rich tribal leader. It was expected that he would have lots of women around him. So have a child with Hagar, and let that fulfill the promise. Abraham does, and Ishmael is born. God provides for Hagar and Ishmael when Sarah later makes them leave. But Ishmael is not the child of promise. No, Sarah will bear the child that the visitors prophesied.

And the following year, Sarah gives birth. At a pretty advanced age. She may not have been too happy about it. Then again, she probably was happy to have a child. Either way, she and Abraham have this young boy to raise.

The Bible likes to foreshadow things. There is another child of promise, another son that fulfills this promise and a lot of others. There is the promise to David that one of his descendants will do all these wonderful things, and sit on his throne forever. A promise of a Messiah to come is repeated over and over in the Bible. So what we see here is a foreshadowing of the coming of the Messiah, Jesus.

Jesus is born not of an old woman, but a rather young one, who isn't even married yet, a virgin, who gives birth in strange circumstances, on a trip, in a stable. She doesn't respond to the announcement that she will bring forth a son with laughter, but she is filled with questions: how can this be? Finally, she answers the angel with "let it be with me according to your word." And at the appropriate time, Jesus is born.

In the promises we see that God is active and engaged with our world. He brings salvation to us, from among us, in Jesus Christ. Being human, he shares our nature, but being divine, he does so without sin. And so he is the One who can save us, who can conquer death in a way that will truly affect us. Just as Adam sinned, and includes us in that act, Jesus conquers death, and includes us in his action! God's promise of salvation for all of us is fulfilled.

God's purpose in the long run is not simply to save us and "rescue us from sin," but to set right in the world all that is wrong. He will renew and restore creation, so that it becomes a new creation. He will make all things new and right. There will be justice, and love, and peace between all creatures, between all of us.

Symbolically, God comes to Abraham as three persons. Some on the internet interpret this as God and two angels. And you must believe it if it is online, right? Wrong! This is understood as three men who come to see Abraham. Then the text says several times that "the Lord" said this or that. Where did God come from? The men are angels, messengers of God. And in the text the transition from three men to the Lord is so smooth that most interpreters take the three as representing the Trinity. God came and visited Abraham, making his appearance as three men.

There is a famous Russian icon by Andrei Rublev called the Trinity, and it is a representation of three men sitting around a table, with a house, an oak tree, and Mt. Sinai in the background. Other symbols indicate that these men are actually the Trinity. They sit without motion, as though eternally contemplating peace, love, unity, harmony, and humility. They are present to Abraham and Sarah, and spiritually present to us as well. (If you google Rublev's Trinity you can see this icon.) These three visitors came to Abraham and Sarah and made a promise. They come to our world and renew the promise made to Abraham. They do not promise us a son, but they come with the promise of the Son, the Messiah, the Savior, Jesus.

In the East, icons are seen not as pictures but as windows into heaven, windows into the truth. We can see these three sitting in eternal unity and peace, with love and humility and harmony. Isn't that what we want, what we long for, in our world?

In our world just now there is a lot of tension and little peace. Every day there are protests across the world, demanding, crying out for, hoping for, pleading for, justice. For a change in the way that black people are treated.

It seems to me there are three ways we can respond. The first is the Nixon response: we pound the table and demand Law and Order! And as reasonable as that sounds, it actually perpetuates and strengthens the systemic racism in our world. That puts us in opposition to black people and their cries for justice. The second way is to agree that these cries have a point, to go out there, and tell them how they should do it, how they should protest, how they should phrase it, what the phrases they shout mean. In short, to

go all White on them. That keeps our institutions and status quo intact while we expend great energy in “helping and supporting” the movement.

The third way was expressed best in an email I was copied on this week, from a black pastor in the community, who said,

*To get started: Read the book White Fragility, watch the movie 13th, and 12 years Slave. This is a start to understand the racism in this country for over 400 years. Understand lynching language. Then ask yourself, what can I do to create change.*

*Then the next issue is the racism in Christianity when it comes to our local churches. As a black female clergy I've experienced racism and genderism. The places that are supposed to show God's love, show hatred because of unbiblical morals, personal piety, power, privilege and politics.*

*We talk about being an inclusive body, but the black church doesn't have a voice or the black church voice must use the same language as those sitting at the table.*

*Discussion is good, but the black clergy should have to lead it. We've led for a long time and no one listened until now.*

We have to sit and listen, sit and be taught. There is a YouTube video I posted a few days ago about White Fragility – the author explains what is in the book, reads excerpts, and challenges us severely. The movie “13th” talks about the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which set the slaves free after the Civil War, and how the end of the war was not the end of racism, how it changed form and moves in our society still.

These things show us that the presuppositions we bring to the discussion are well-meaning but mostly wrong.

But we have hope. We have the confidence that God will bring about the promised future, and in that future all races will be treated with equity and justice. For now, we listen and learn. A couple of other clergy and I are trying to get something going in the local community sometime fairly soon, so that those who are interested can meet with others and start the conversation. Stay tuned!

Again, for now, we trust in God's engagement and activity in our world. If God can bring it about so that old women and virgins have sons, well, there is no telling what else may happen, what other strange and wonderful things God will do. Hang on! God is laughing, and God will get the last laugh!

Thanks be to God! Amen.