

Laughing at God

Third in the Family of God Sermon Series

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Psalm 40:1-8

¹I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. ²He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. ³He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. ⁴Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.

⁵You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. ⁶Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not

required. ⁷Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. ⁸I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

Genesis 21:1-21

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” ⁷And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” ⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”

¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. ¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Today our journey with Abraham and Sarah takes us into very complicated territory. A couple of weeks ago we left home with them, when they were called by God, into a future based on the promise that God would go with them, they would be blessed with land and descendants, and through them *all the families of the earth would be blessed*. They packed up their belongings and set out in faith because they trusted the Promise-maker.

Last Sunday we considered how – when the promises were slow in coming, they tried to bring them about by their own devices. Having been called to be the parents of a great nation, but with no child in sight, Sarah offered her slave, Hagar, to Abraham and Ishmael was born to them. Later, when God showed up, in the guise of three strangers, and promised that Sarah would yet give birth to a child in her old age, in utter disbelief, Sarah doubled over in laughter behind the tent door. Our story this morning begins with the birth of that promised child, Isaac, whose name means, “He laughs,” and Sarah celebrates his remarkable birth saying: “God has brought laughter for me.” Genesis is a story about this family of Abraham and Sarah, who gave birth to the community and the monotheistic religion of ancient Israel. But Genesis is also a story about another "family," the whole human family.

Today’s chapter in this larger family saga, as hard as it is to hear, assures us – again of God’s intended blessing for *all* of God’s children. Scholar Thomas Mann sums up this ancient text: “Genesis is a book about dysfunctional families and the ways in which God seeks to use those families as agents of divine grace to all the families of the earth.”

One of the things that feels most dysfunctional in this drama I think is Sarah’s treatment of Hagar. First – that she offered her slave to Abraham to father a child by her; and secondly, how jealous and cruel she becomes when she casts Hagar and little Ishmael out of their household where they are left in the wilderness to die. Some historic context helps. When Sarah gave her Egyptian slave to Abraham, it was a perfectly legal thing for her to do. Custom allowed not only for Abraham to father children by the family’s slave, but also for Sarah and Abraham to raise that child as their own.

So in Sarah’s mind, this previous act resulting in the birth of Ishmael, has made her little boy Isaac the younger son, which raises the questions of inheritance. Who will bear the descendants of the great nation that God promised back in the

beginning – when Isaac was born after Ishmael?

Now, in our Judeo-Christian tradition, we do not pay much attention to Ishmael and Hagar. The Letter to the Galatians makes reference to Sarah and Hagar giving birth to two different nations, but in so doing, it describes the whole scenario as “an allegory” – meant to be interpreted with hidden meaning to explain why one people is free and another enslaved. Other than that – fairly odd - New Testament reference, Hagar and Ishmael and his twelve sons disappear into the Arabian Desert – while our attention is turned to Isaac’s son Jacob, and then the twelve tribes of Israel. But to hundreds of millions of Muslim people, Hagar and Ishmael become central figures.

In the Qur’an, Ishmael is a prophet of whom it is written: *“And make mention in the Scripture of Ishmael. Lo! He was a keeper of the promise, and he is, a messenger of Allah, a prophet. He enjoined upon his people worship and almsgiving, and was acceptable in the sight of the Lord.”*¹

Muslim pilgrims to Mecca have vivid associations with Ishmael and Hagar. Pilgrims walk seven times around the Qa’aba, their holiest shrine. It’s a cube-like structure that according to tradition was built by Adam, and then rebuilt by Abraham when he paid a visit to Ishmael. Near the Qa’aba is the holy well whose waters miraculously appeared to save Ishmael’s life, and pilgrims pace shaking their shoulders there to imitate the frantic Hagar searching in despair for water for Ishmael whose cries are heard by God. This treasured story of Ishmael and Hagar function in the Islamic tradition the way narratives about vulnerable children function in ours – Moses cast adrift in the bulrushes, Joseph and Mary carrying baby Jesus on the flight into Egypt.²

The Qur’an shares many of the same stories preserved in our scriptures: not just Abraham, but also stories about Moses, the commandments, the prophets, the holy city of Jerusalem, charity, fasting, prayer, sacred texts, sacred washing, justice, free will, care for neighbors, angels, and the coming messiah. The Bible and the Qur’an just remember these stories differently in Islam and in our Judeo-Christian tradition.

¹ Qur’an 19:54-55.

² William Holladay, *Christian Century’s* Living the Word, 6/12/96.

Despite the divergent pathways that ancient Judaism and Islam took from this same First Family of Faith, there is something in our reading that we should never let go of. God continued to bless the family of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and their descendants, but God never abandoned Hagar and Ishmael.

Sarah banished them to the desert to die, but God hears the cry of young Ishmael. God provides water for them so that they will not die of thirst, and God promises to make of Ishmael a great nation, so that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all trace our family tree back to Father Abraham.

When you feel deeply convicted about your own religious beliefs and practices, it is hard to understand those of another. In local, national and global communities, the world is crying out for more tolerance and interfaith respect as well as understanding. Amid the worlds of violence, fear and distrust of the “other” it is important for us to remember that – through Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, we have cousins who follow the religious tenets of Islam as a branch of the same ancient family tree.

The most recent book by Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, is called *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*. It is a memoir of her own faith development during the twenty years she taught a course on Religions of the World at Piedmont College, a small liberal arts college in the foothills of the north Georgia mountains. She took the title, *Holy Envy*, from a speech made by biblical scholar and Dean of Harvard Divinity School, Krister Stendahl, after he was elected the Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm. In the mid-1980's in Stockholm the opening of a Mormon temple stirred fierce opposition. At a press conference before the dedication of the building Stendahl tried to diffuse the mounting tension in his community by offering three rules for religious understanding. First, when trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies. Second, do not compare your best to their worst. Assuming something about Islam promotes terrorism is like saying White Supremacists represent Christianity. We should not compare our best to their worst. And third, leave room for holy envy.

What Taylor says he meant by “holy envy” is that there are aspects of another's religion that we can admire, even emulate, that may even bring to new life aspects of our own religion. In teaching her class she discovered she found things

she envied in all of the traditions she taught. Some were compatible with the Christian faith, like the Jewish Sabbath or the Buddhist focus on compassion. Others forced a choice like the Hindu view that humans create their own destiny through many lifetimes. Taylor describes one class field trip down to Atlanta to learn about Islam, when the imam ended the meeting with her students saying, “Our deepest desire is not that you become Muslim, but that you become the best Christian, the best Jew, the best person you can be. In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, thank you for coming.”

With envy of that imam’s interfaith hospitality, Taylor began to feel called to be genuinely more open to people of other faiths, as she puts it: “I believe this has become my Christian duty. I believe it is the neighborly thing to do, the Christ-like thing to do. Part of my ongoing priesthood is to find the bridges between my faith and the faiths of other people, so that those of us who draw water from wells on different sides of the river can still get together from time to time, making the whole area safer for our children.”³

Friends, we worship a God who chose a covenant people by calling Abraham and Sarah, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. To that end, God gave us commandments and laws about always welcoming the stranger, and loving our neighbor. And God made sure that our neighborhood is as large as the earth, and filled with the colorful diversity of every race and people. From the beginning, God made sure that children of Ishmael would also be recipients of divine blessing. Even Jesus would later come to say in the gospel of John: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” One of the great mysteries of our faith is that our one God, “has a soft spot for religious strangers, both as agents of divine blessing and as recipients of divine grace.”

The liturgy of the Reformed Synagogues in the United Kingdom includes a poem that imagines a later meeting of Isaac and Ishmael long after they had been parted as young brothers. Used in the liturgy for each New Year’s Day, the poem imagines Isaac speaking to his brother Ishmael:

Ishmael, my brother,
How long shall we fight each other?

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, pgs. 9, 79, 8, 25, 120.

My brother from times bygone,
My brother, Hagar's son,
My brother, the wandering one.

One angel was sent to us both,
One angel watched over our growth –
There is in the wilderness, death threatening through thirst,
I a sacrifice on the altar, Sarah's first.

Ishmael, my brother, hear my plea:
It was the angel who tied thee to me...
Time is running out, put hatred to sleep.
Shoulder to shoulder, let's water our sheep.⁴

May we so live from the heart of our faith, wishing others well at the heart of theirs, thereby fulfilling our calling that through God's expansive family of faith *all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

AMEN.

⁴ Poem by Shin Shalom included in unpublished Moveable Feast preaching seminary paper by Chandler Stokes, 2008, is from *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship*, The Assembly of the Rabbis of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, vol. 3, London, p. 891.