The Last Laugh

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

19[Abraham] …did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was alreadyas good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:19-21).

Abraham did not weaken in faith? There was no distrust? No wavering? Then how do we explain Abraham’s reaction to the news that Sarah was going to have his child? It’s in the three verses that follow today’s first lesson:

17Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” 18And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” 19God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac.” (Genesis 17:17-19 NRSV)

God told Abraham that he would have a Son through Sarah, so “Abraham fell on his face and laughed.” Note he laughed hard… fell on his face… doubled up… rolled around on the ground… in front of God and everyone. This was a good one, all right. Sarah was going to have his baby… he was 100 and Sarah was 90. It must have seemed like some kind of joke!

Abraham’s laughing sounds a lot like weakening and distrusting and wavering, concerning the promise of God. It is also evident when Abraham reminds God that Abraham already has a son. To paraphrase Abraham, he says; “God, why can’t you settle for the possible? I’ve already got a son… not Sarah’s, but at least I have a son. So let’s just accept things the way they are.”

But God said; “Abraham, now listen to me. Sarah will be the mother of your son and that’s the way it is… and by the way, you will name him Isaac.” And Abraham, who knew his Hebrew, Abraham got the point; After all, the name Isaac means “laughter.” And a little later in the story, when Sarah hears about becoming a mother, she also laughs. Who said God didn't have a sense of humor?

But I wonder who will get in the last laugh? For you see, God’s promise comes true and Abraham and Sarah do have a son whom they name Isaac.

The problem is clearly Abraham’s laugh. First, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham meaning “father of many.” Then God tells him about Sarah having his child.

So how can Paul conclude that for Abraham, there was no weakening, no wavering, no distrusting, concerning the promise of God?

I wonder if this falling down laughter might have been an immediate reaction to something so impossible to believe. He laughed and then he went on in excitement to believe and to trust. At first there was shock, and with good reason. But then he remembered that “with God all things are possible!” And “God keeps God’s promises!” So shock gave way to believing.

Or perhaps the falling down laughter was affirmation. Instead of laughter meaning; “You’ve got to be joking,” it can also mean “Isn’t that amazing?” After all, Abraham had become accustomed to a God of great surprises.

Or perhaps there just might be a touch of us in Abraham… believing and not believing… trusting and not trusting… holding fast and wavering.

Whatever his laughter means, “his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.’” Faith makes our relationship with God right… even when faith is not the only reality. Even if we don’t get it right all of the time, our God-given faith creates a right relationship between God and us. And that sure is a relief, because we don’t always get it right… no one does.

Take Peter, for example. In the verses immediately preceding this morning’s Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples who they believe he is. Peter answers boldly; “You are the Messiah.” It’s the right answer… Peter gets it. He understands.

But only moments later, Jesus begins to tell the disciples that he must suffer and be killed and rise in three days. And Peter, the one who understands so perfectly, Peter rebukes Jesus, saying, “no! no! no! You’re the Messiah, and the Messiah does not suffer.”

So of course, Jesus rebukes Peter. He rebukes him publicly, so that everyone can hear and understand. He even calls him Satan - that is, the obstructer, or opposer.

So perhaps Peter does not understand, or perhaps Peter understands all too well. The Messiah will suffer, and so will any who follow him. “Get behind me, Satan,” that is, get in line behind me, Peter… follow me.

34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34-35).

Peter had hoped that believing the right information about Jesus was enough. But Jesus called Peter and the disciples and the crowd, (and that includes us) to a relationship that demands we follow Jesus, lose our life - give it away. Now what does it mean to lose our life… to give it away?

In 155 A.D. The Romans were having a grand celebration in honor of the Greek and Roman gods, a celebration that included killing Christians. Because Polycarp was in his 80’s at the time, the governor pleaded with him, saying; “Have respect for your age. You deserve to die in peace. Promise to worship Caesar and curse Christ. Then I will let you go.”

Polycarp answered; “86 years I have served Christ and he never did me any wrong. How can I speak evil of my king who saved me?” And so he was executed most painfully.

Polycarp’s life and death teach us that to follow Jesus means to give up myself for God’s greater purposes. The last thing I’m willing to give up, and the first thing I must give up is myself. For until I give myself up to God’s greater purposes, I’m still believing there is another way, another God, another giver of life, another savior.

Abraham doesn’t always get it right… nor does Peter, nor do we. But there is one who does get it right, from beginning to end.

No distrust makes Jesus waver concerning the promise of God. From beginning to end, Jesus hopes against hope, always moving toward the fulfillment of God’s promise. From preaching and teaching, to trial and crucifixion, Jesus trusted in God without wavering. And at the end, there was a resurrection and a place of honor at God’s right hand.

God keeps God’s promise. From Abraham and Sarah whose aged bodies killed all hope for offspring, God brought forth Isaac. And from a crucified Jesus whose body was thoroughly dead, God brought forth a resurrected Lord and Savior. It was God who was faithful. It was God who created the right relationship and nurtured it and sustained it and gave these relationships their redeeming power. And God is doing the same for us.

This Gospel today is so dominated by the themes of suffering - the suffering of Jesus and our own, that it’s possible we’ll miss six simple words. So let’s make sure we hear them; they are,

“…and after three days rise again.”

These are the words of promise for Jesus and for us. The story of Jesus will end in triumph. God’s history with humankind… with you and me... will end in triumph.

Abraham hopes against hope and God brings forth Isaac from Sarah’s barren womb. Jesus hopes against hope and God brings forth Jesus from the grave, leaving the tomb empty. From Genesis to Easter to judgment day, God gives life to the dead.

Abraham may have had the first laugh. But there is no question that God will get the last, delightful, triumphant laugh. And you and I will get in the last, delightful, triumphant, chance to give God praise. For we have a great and wonderful God. Thanks be to God this 2nd Sunday in the season of Lent.