

Lost Causes And Laughing Places  
Genesis 18:1-15(21:1-7) Psalm 100  
Matthew 9:35-10:8, Romans 5:1-8

Read Genesis 18:1 and Psalm 100.

I want to tell you a little story about a lost cause and a laughing place. If ever there was a lost cause, it was the cause of Abraham and Sarah's childbearing. You see, Abraham and Sarah were old by any measure. He was pushing 100 and she was 90 or nearly so. Years earlier, God called Abraham to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees – located in what is now modern-day Iraq – to migrate to Palestine – the Promised Land – where God promised to make Abraham the father of a great nation. Furthermore, God promised to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham and his offspring. But that promise had yet to be fulfilled. Sarah was barren and well past her prime and Abraham was no better off than she.

Then one day, while Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent, in the heat of the day, "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre." (Gn. 18:1) In the words of the bible, "He looked up and saw three men standing near him." (Gn. 18:2) How those three men represented the Lord is not here revealed. Be that as it may, Abraham rose, ran to greet them, and invited them to stay with him. "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant." Abraham said. "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." (Gn. 18:3-5) So, the three men agreed to stay and Abraham ran off to make all things ready. Going into his tent, he told Sarah to prepare some cakes for their guests. Going to his flocks, he selected a calf, tender and good, gave it to his servant, and told him to prepare it. And when all was ready, he set the calf, and the cakes, and some curds in front of his guest and stood nearby to serve them as they ate.

That's when one of the men said, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And (Abraham) said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.'" (Gn. 18:9-10) Now Sarah was eavesdropping at the entrance of her tent and when she heard this, she laughed to herself the laugh of the incredulous! "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" she said to herself. And the Lord overheard her and said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." (Gn. 18:11-14)

And that's precisely what happened. The bible says, "The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him...Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." (Gn. 21:1-3, 6)

What you cannot see from this narrative, but what you may already know, is that the Hebrew name "Isaac" actually means "laughter." So, laughter runs throughout this little

story of a God who champions lost causes...from the laughter of Abraham who also laughed when God reiterated his promise to make Abraham the father of many nations – for the bible says, “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?’” (Gn. 17:17) – to the laughter of Sarah in her tent as described in Genesis 18:12 – to the laughter of both when the promise was fulfilled and they named their little boy “Isaac,” which means “Laughter!”

Perhaps laughter really is the best response to the goodness of God, after all. And perhaps that’s why the Psalm appointed for today, if not exactly encouraging laughter, at least comes very close to it when it says, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing...Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” (Ps. 100:1-2, 4-5) Why, you can almost hear laughter bubbling up in those words, can’t you?

You see, the bible is one long record bearing witness to the truth that our God is the Lord of lost causes, and laughter is our best response to his great goodness toward us. All of today’s readings seem to reiterate the point. For example, do you remember how God promised to make Abraham the father of many nations and how he promised to use Abraham and his offspring to bring great blessing to the earth? Well that promise was fulfilled through Jesus Christ who was one of Abraham’s offspring. (See Mt. 1:1) And in the gospel lesson appointed for today, we see this same Jesus bringing blessing to a crowd of lost causes!

Matthew 9:35-38 says, “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Mt. 9:35-36) Like sheep without a shepherd! Now there’s a lost cause! Yes, when Jesus looked out at the crowd, he saw a lot of lost causes – more than any one man, even the Son of Man, could ever address alone. So, he invited his disciples to join him in bringing God’s blessing to the lost causes all around him by saying to them, “Go...proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” (Mt. 10:5a, 7-8) We may not see laughter listed in our text, but who can doubt that laughter was present when the sick were cured, the dead were raised, the lepers were cleansed, and the demons cast out? And all of this was, in the words of Jesus, “good news!” Good news, indeed! And doesn’t good news often illicit at least a little chuckle if not a round of rollicking laughter? Yes, the bible is one long record bearing witness to the fact that our God is the Lord of lost causes, and laughter is the very best response to his great goodness toward us.

Finally, lest we ever forget it, the New Testament reading for today reminds us that we were once lost causes, too, and we have cause for tremendous joy given the work of Jesus on our behalf! Romans 5:1-8 describes how God acted in and through Jesus to

deal with the problem of our sin. And sin is a problem for us all. As Paul said in Romans 3:23, all of us have sinned and have fallen short. But what is sin? Sin is that inherent weakness in us that saps our moral strength. It is the spiritual infection that makes us morally and mortally ill. It is that essential flaw of character that mars the beauty and the goodness for which we were created. So, God came in Christ to do all things needful to forgive, repair, and cure the problem of our sin. And so, Romans 5:6-8 says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." And what was the result of his dying? Romans 5:1 gives the answer. According to Paul, "...we are justified by faith (in him, so) we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have (also) obtained access to this grace in which we stand." In other words, because of what Jesus did, we are justified, pardoned, acquitted, or forgiven. In addition, we have peace with God or we're reconciled to God and God to us. And finally, we have access to the grace in which we stand. In other words, we have access to God's gracious care and merciful treatment for time and for eternity. And because of this, and so much more, Paul says, "we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." In other words, we exult or rejoice in our hope of sharing the glorious nature and glorious habitation of our glorious God, both now and forevermore! (Rm. 5:2) So you see, God comes to the lost cause that describes us, and does something so wonderful that it makes us boast, or exult, or laugh out loud! And that's good news! Very good news, indeed!

Well, my friends, there's very little laughter in the world today. The news is one long litany of lamentation. And the lamentation is right and good given the circumstances in which we find ourselves. But as the old Psalm says it: weeping may last for a night but joy comes in the morning. What our weeping world needs is a laughing place to return to from time to time where it can have its sad soul refreshed by remembering that beneath the present sorrow there's a wellspring of goodness and joy, grace and laughter, to renew the flagging spirit. What our weeping world needs is a laughing place to return to every now and then to remember that God has blessed us, is blessing us, and will bless us still. Who knows, that blessing may be in the process of being worked out even now through the hard and grievous labors of the lamenters in the streets. But let's never forget that not all is sorrowful in our world. Not all is sadness. There's a deep gladness in the world that refreshes the sin sick soul. God is in the business of blessing the least, the last, the lonely, and the lost causes of our world. And he calls us as he called those first disciples, to join him in bearing that blessing to the world. That's good news, and cause for laughter...don't you think? So, remember that, whenever the promise of laughter seems long in coming, as it most certainly did for Abraham and Sarah while they waited for little Isaac to be born. God really is in the business of blessing lost causes, and laughter is this lost world's best response to the great goodness of God as showered upon us all!

With that in mind, I urge you and all the earth to "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing...Enter his

gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” (Ps. 100:1-2, 4-5) Even this generation! Amen!