

The God Who Surprises

Dr. Alan Rodda



*Genesis 18:1-15; Genesis 21:1-7;
Matthew 19:26*

There are many ways to categorize people we know. We all do it, right? This person is conservative and that one is liberal. This friend is idealistic – head in the sky - and the other is pragmatic – just the facts. And this one loves to be surprised and that one doesn't.

Last week, I was with Ruth Pierce, whom many of you know. When her family and friends threw a surprise party for her 102nd birthday. When the balloons and cake were delivered, and the people said, “surprise”, her reaction was, “Wonderful, I can't believe it. This is great! 102 here I come”. Ruth loves surprises.

My cousin didn't like surprises. Time and time again, she would say, “Don't ever surprise me; I hate surprises”. A couple of her friends who didn't believe her decided to test it one day, and put a boxed present on her sofa table. When she opened it, a little musical jingle started playing, and at the “pop” note, out came a jack-in-the-box clown. That “test” blew their assumptions, when she screamed and banged it on the table until it quit working. Marilyn hated surprises.

I was reading an article by a surpriseologist (did you know there is such a one?), who was delving into the love/hate relationship people have with surprise. She wrote, “Those events we don't expect, are for some an experience of wonder. For others, when they are startled by anything good or bad, these experiences are frightening and to be avoided.”

I'm not a surpriseologist, but I do know this. We all sometimes experience things we would classify as “unexpected events”. Some people put it into their bucket of “life's sweet mysteries”. But others who prefer routine and predictability can be thrown off balance, and react with disbelief or skepticism.

Which brings us back to the story we just read - a story about a surprise, a big surprise. The story about a married couple, Abram and Sarai, who were getting on

in years. They were nomads. They moved around a lot, to provide grazing for the flocks. Years ago, God asked them to move to a new land, promising, “I will make of you a great nation”. However, that was years ago. No child came to Sarai; and in her desperation to give Abram an heir, she had asked him to father a child with Hagar the maid, but the plan for that child was not God's plan, and we know in history how that story unfolded.

Now more years have come and gone. Abram and Sarai are now 99 and 95. They're at the time of life when most of us would have downsized, sold the big house, gotten rid of stuff that is no longer needed and settled into an easier life style. Like Sarai, we would *not* be contemplating having a baby. Yes, there was the matter of that promise: “I will make of you a great nation”. They probably hadn't talked about God's promise in a long time, or perhaps they had forgotten about it.

But years later, the Lord appears again to Abram and Sarai, and initiates a divine renaming ceremony. God changed Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. That was something big! To change a name in the Jewish tradition was extraordinary, for it meant a change in who that person was and in what that person would do and become. The old name, Abram meant “exalted father.” The new name - Abraham - means “father of many.” By changing his name, God set Abraham apart as his servant with a special destiny - to be the father of a great nation, through which he would bless the earth. And the same with Sarai, whose name meant “my princess”, changing it to Sarah (Genesis. 17:15-16), meaning “mother of nations”. God told Abraham that Sarah would have a baby! And become the “mother of nations.” Surprise!

And what was Abraham's reaction? He fell to the ground on face and laughed (Genesis 17:17). Then, a little later, in the midday heat, Abraham sat in the shade at the opening of his tent when three strangers appeared out of nowhere. As was the nomadic custom, Abraham welcomed the strangers and offered hospitality.

As they sat, one of the strangers asked, “By the way, where is Sarah?” How did his stranger know her name? It's the Lord. Then the stranger said, “I'll return and when I do she'll have a baby.” Here is that surprise talk again! Sarah, inside the tent, preparing the food, was listening in. When the stranger got to the part about her having a baby, she couldn't contain herself. She laughed.

“I pray that each of us who follows the Lord will experience at least one event in life that defies logic and can have no other explanation but God.”

I can almost imagine her thoughts: “So like a man to be talking so confidently, so nonsensically about a matter he obviously doesn't understand at all.” Her reaction? “No way”. I'm not buying in to this surprise”.

What is the meaning of Abraham and Sarah's laughter? What made them laugh? Or, for that matter, what makes any of us laugh? What constitutes humor? Many commentators have spoken of Abraham and Sarah's humor, and I know of at least one book written on it. The key point is that the Hebrew word for “laugh” in this passage is different than most other words for “laughter” in the Scriptures. In most instances, the word for “laugh” means “delight and joy”. However, in this passage, the Hebrew word *va-yisma*, literally means “forced joy”. In other words, their laughter is not from a source of real joy, but something else: incredulity and unbelief.

When I was in graduate school, I took a course on humor, and learned this. In most of the theories about humor two elements are present that make something funny: incongruity and surprise.

Incongruity is when the humorist puts together two or more things that are contradictory. Surprise is when that person introduces something into the narrative - an idea, an event, a person - that is unexpected. It's incongruity and surprise joined together, for example, that lie behind the humor of comedians like Woody Allen. When asked if he believed in an afterlife, Mr. Allen said, “No I don't, but I'm taking along an extra pair of underwear just in case”.

That is incongruity and surprise joining together in humor; but this is not the case with Abraham and Sarah's reaction here. Behind their laughter is an attitude, not of surprise, but incongruity and disbelief.

We've all experienced examples of this, haven't we?

A laugh that is the reaction of someone who is bitter about something, hoping that we will reinforce it with our laughter. I believe that represents Sarah's laughter. She has heard that story before; for the last twenty-four years, to be exact. And now in her nineties, and Abraham nearly one hundred, Sarah has long since given up on the hope. She can laugh at the preposterousness, the incongruity of an old woman having a baby, one foot in the grave and the other in a maternity ward. Sarah expected no surprises from God, no novelty, no violations of the world she had grown accustomed to. When Sarah laughs, she is laughing the laugh of someone who does not believe that God can fulfill his promise.

With feeling, Sarah shouted from the tent, “I did not laugh. And the Lord's response to Sarah? “Yes you laughed”.

Have you ever thought about how embarrassing it would be if your thoughts were heard, even if you did not speak them? So that whatever you were thinking was broadcast for everyone to know? Instead of “great sermon, pastor”, you go out the door, others hear you saying out loud, “I thought it would never end!”

God has heard Sarah's thoughts! This is no ordinary stranger. Even though Sarah shouted from her tent, “I did not laugh”; the Lord knew differently. Without even turning in her direction, He said, “Yes, you did laugh.” And then that pointed question: “Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and you will have a son”. She tried to cover up her laughter, but that didn't work with the Lord, who knew the very thoughts and intentions of her heart. When we respond with something out of an attitude of unbelief, are we, like Sarah, demoting God from His

place of sovereign power and promote ourselves over Him? Are our ears, like Sarah's, closed to the Lord's next words to her: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Sarah laughed when God did not. It wasn't a laughing matter to the Lord.

I think that all of us struggle with this problem at times. Perhaps, like Abraham and Sarah, we have prayed for something that has not happened according to how we think it. We feel that life is passing us by while we wait. We struggle with doubt, wondering if our prayers are really being heard. For we who have suffered some tragedy, we may have wondered, "Where was God when this happened?" Maybe it's a family problem that has dragged on for years. You wonder, "Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't He answer?"

It's then that we are tempted to settle into a kind of predictability that we call the "norm" and from that place in our hearts, we "manage" our spiritual lives. Instead of looking with hope at the thought that "God's mercies are new every morning," open to wonderful surprises, we replace that thought with one that says "I really don't want the promise of newness every morning. I'm at the point where I don't want anything new. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and muffin for breakfast as normal. At this point of my life, I can do without surprises."

The Lord's words to Sarah - "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" - speak to any of us who struggle with doubting his promises - as she did. The implication of these Divine words? How could anything be too difficult for the Lord, who spoke the universe into existence? How can anything be too difficult for the Lord who was tempted as we are, but overcame his doubts brought on by the Tempter?

Reflect with me for a moment. Is there something in this story that the Lord wants to teach you? Me? Us? Is He perhaps allowing us to come to the end of our human strength and then lead us to trust in His ability to do the impossible? Or possibly has he not answered because our faith may have become something based on habit and routine rather than wonder and expectation of what He can do when we fully trust him? Is there anything too difficult for the Lord?

Remember, this is not the only surprise in scripture. The Bible is all about a God of surprises. A God who time

and time again comes to his people when they have given up, when they've concluded that this is all there is and they are forgotten. A God who comes particularly when their backs are against the wall and their hearts are full of fear. A God who surprisingly confronts evil, redeems the unredeemable, binds up wounds and strengthens hearts. A God for whom nothing is too difficult.

What could be more surprising than God coming into the world in the birth of a child, born of humble parents in the insignificant village of Bethlehem? What could be more surprising than a man who taught so brilliantly, healed so lovingly, reached out to the marginalized so graciously, and died so courageously. And then, the greatest surprise of all, defeated death.

What can be more surprising than an angry bitter man - Saul, determined to kill Christians, suddenly being turned around and spreading the news of the Gospel to the known world with his new new God-given name - Paul - transforming the church and writing letters that continue to challenge and inspire us in our journey with Christ.

And we know that God's surprises don't stop at the close of the Scriptures. They go on and on, right up to this minute. God still surprises people. Like our friend and my predecessor - Phil Bliss. Phil and Margarite's son David at an early age began using and selling drugs, despite his godly parenting, and for 17 years was heavily addicted, losing his family, job and home. Phil and Margarite never lost faith - they kept praying; and turned their son totally over to the Lord, saying, "Lord, the only thing that could ever keep David from killing himself is you." Believing that nothing is too difficult for God, they saw David put his life back together, get his family back, and become a pastor. And in a couple of hours David will move to the pulpit and preach to his thriving congregation in California.

I also know that many of you could tell us about the ways you have experienced God coming somehow out of nowhere with an unexpected and wonderful breakthrough in your life, even when you thought all was lost; God making some amazing things, far beyond human capability, happen.

Again I ask, is anything too hard for God?

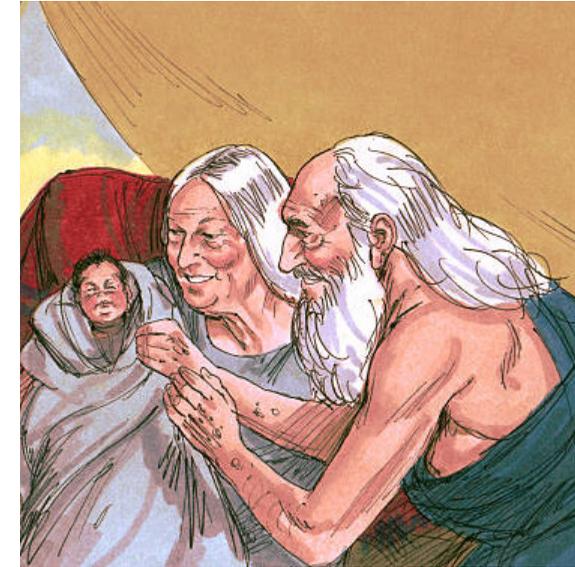
Answer "yes" and our worlds constrict, our universe closes, and God is no longer fully God. Life is probably

manageable, but sooner or later we become like Sarah in the tent in the face of disappointment and the incongruities we experience. Answer "Yes", then some things become too difficult for God. Then have we concluded that God is not fully God? Have we decided to live in a closed universe where everything is stable and reliable, but spiritually disappointing?

However, if we answer "No, there is nothing that is too hard for God," and put our full faith and heart into His keeping, the possibilities can be endless. God is radically free to keep his promises despite the odds. If the answer is "No", we have taken the leap of faith and decided to live in His world that is full of possibility, hopefulness, life, and surprises.

Let's complete this story. Fast forward to the surprise. Sarah does conceive, have a child and he is named Isaac. Do you know the Hebrew meaning of Isaac? It is "laughter." Sarah laughs again and says, "God has brought laughter for me". But it's a different laughter now; joyful laughter at the surprising, unpredictable, unlikely grace of God.

He invites us to do the same. I pray that each of us who follows the Lord will experience at least one event in life that defies logic and can have no other explanation but God. That we will experience a God of promise and wonderful surprises who will make a way where there seems to be no way; a God who, precisely when we are afraid, resigned and without hope, settling into boring predictability, will come with new possibilities; a God so surprising that we are enabled to live our lives with the release, and joyful laughter he intended; a God for whom nothing is too impossible.



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