

A Laughing Matter – Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

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Summer has arrived. And maybe more than any other season, summer has a way of causing us to reminisce. For example, every time I drive down Northshore Drive and see all the boats—either docked or out on the water—it takes me back to my childhood and the countless weekends and vacations spent at my family’s summer cabin. It was there that we spent endless days and nights in the boat—sitting, riding, skiing, tubing, going fast, going slow, or going nowhere at all.

It’s interesting to me that I don’t yearn much for being in boats anymore—partly because I don’t want the responsibility for one. But it’s also partly because I don’t want my nostalgia to be interrupted or compromised. My remembrances of my boating life were so good, and those memories take me back to a time of youth, family, and friends that was so precious to me. I will forever be comforted and brightened by those memories of being on and around the water.

You all have similar nostalgic memories, I know. You reminisce about moments or periods in your past when you especially felt alive or at peace or joyful or otherwise at the top of your game. They are moments that hit you and seem unexplainable.

And in moments like that, you long to be taken back there if only for a moment to experience those feelings again.

The writer, professor, and podcaster Kate Bowler wrote a great piece in her weekly digest this week about the concept of nostalgia. She wrote, “It’s been hijacking me a lot lately. I caught

a whiff of someone's coconut sunscreen at a gas station last week and was instantly twelve years old in the back seat of an air-conditioned Datsun. My dad called the other day and sang the high notes to "Sherry Baby" like he did when I was nine and he was forty-three and the whole shape of our lives was different. A friend told me her mother, deep in dementia now, cannot remember her own daughter's name but can sing every word of "How Great Thou Art." That is a gift of nostalgia too. That is the past doing the thing the present cannot."

She talked about how, "The term *nostalgia* was coined in 1688 by a Swiss medical student, who needed a name for what he thought was an illness afflicting Swiss mercenaries serving in foreign armies. He took the Greek *nostos*—homecoming—and *algos*—pain—and stitched them together. *The pain of wanting to come home*. He thought it was a disease of the brain, possibly fatal. There are medical reports of soldiers being discharged for it."

Stories like these remind us that we often take a perfectly ordinary emotional experience—wanting to be home, missing your mother, hearing a song that knocks you sideways—and treat it as a medical emergency. Or a moral failing.

But nostalgia is a way that we embrace our identities formed when we were younger and continue them into the present and even into the future. It is a phenomenon we sometimes can't explain.

"Psychologists have actually studied this—what they call *self-continuity*, the felt sense that you are still the person you were ten or twenty or fifty years ago. Nostalgia helps produce this self-continuity.

“Nostalgia looks backward, but researchers tell us it *functions* forward. It is not retreat; it is preparation. It is how we pull the past into the present in order to imagine a future that has us in it.”

In other words, properly engaged, nostalgia is one of the most underrated psychological resources we have.

Nostalgia, then, while sometimes making us cry, can also make us smile—laugh even. A funny, nostalgic experience from our past can bring good thoughts, then even make us laugh when we didn’t see it coming. And the laughter reveals not only the hilarity of a past moment, but the joy and gratitude we feel for it having occurred.

In this story in Genesis, something so significant for Abraham and Sara is met with such disbelief but also with such amazement that it invokes a world-famous response from this now-expectant mother. In their extreme old age, the couple is told by God’s agents that they are going to be parents. And hearing this news, Sara laughs.

At first, her laughter was perceived by God as being that of doubt and lack of trust. “Why did Sara laugh?” God asks Abraham. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

And Sara responded out of fear, “I did not laugh.”

“Yes, you did,” God said. (The exchange itself is almost laughable: I didn’t laugh. Yes, you did. No, I didn’t. Yes, you did. No, I didn’t.)

Later in the story, her laughter transitions from a symbol of her doubt to an expression of the unexplainable joy she feels, to the point where she names her son Isaac, which means “son of laughter.” And she says, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Her laughter was born out of the amazement of having such an unexpected dream become a reality. It was the byproduct of God bringing an incredible blessing.

Moments Abraham and Sara experienced fall into this category, but so do other less dramatic moments. A nostalgic remembrance that brings a smile, laughter, or even a tear usher in this blessing.

A pastor and theologian named Keith Giles shared an experienced he had that revealed one of these unexplainable moments:

“[One] day I was driving home in my car from work, talking to God, and expressing my concern that there wasn’t really anything left for me to learn about the Bible, or theology.

“Seriously. I actually said these words out loud to God as I was driving down the freeway in Southern California at the ripe old age of 27: “There’s really nothing about the Bible I don’t already know the answers to,” I sighed. ...

“Somewhere in Heaven there must have been an inaudible roar of laughter. But I was dead serious. As a licensed and ordained minister, I had taught Bible Studies, preached from the pulpit, studied apologetics, read dozens of books on theology. ...

“On one level, I was right. Sort of. I mean, I did have a lot of information. I had studied a lot about my faith. I had even studied philosophy and world religions in college. As far as I knew, I was an expert on theology and there was really nothing more for me to learn. ...

“That’s where I was that day in my car. My mind was closed. My ability to grow beyond that point in my life was frozen stiff. The cement had officially hardened. ...

So, it wasn't until a few years later [after losing my job and struggling for a time] that I remembered that conversation with God in my car that day. When I did, all of those experiences of God's love and provision, and daily care came flooding back to me. **I laughed out loud.** Because I could see, on the other side of that experience, just how little I really knew anything about God, or faith.

"Suddenly, I had eyes to see just how little my understanding of God was based on my actual experience of God. Up to that point, everything I thought I knew about God was mere information on the page, or theories I had memorized to impress people around me.

"The Gospel is not about acquiring knowledge that fills our brain. It's about encountering a God who fills our heart and transforms our soul from the inside out. ... No, it's not our doubts or our questions about God that threaten our faith, it's our absolute conviction that we already have God all figured out."

That was a laughing moment for Keith Giles. And it changed him.

One Easter Sunday, in a year in which Easter fell on April 1, the associate pastor at a church in New Jersey gathered the children in the front of the sanctuary during the morning service for the Children's Message. The pastor did a big buildup, reciting some of the events that happened on that first Easter, including of course, Jesus' resurrection. She finished her recitation of the facts with "And there Jesus stood!" She then asked the children, "What do you suppose Jesus said to Mary?" At that, one preschool-aged girl shouted, "April Fools'!"

Naturally, the congregation roared with laughter.

Laughter can be a natural outflow to humorous moments like what that congregation experienced that Easter. Or, they can be the result of a blessing realized that we thought impossible, or, like when we have a nostalgic moment, or a new way of understanding or appreciation we had not earlier recognized. Like that theologian who had previously thought he knew all there was to know about God.

And at the center of all this blessing is a God in Jesus Christ through whom, as Paul wrote, “obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” This God makes all this possible. It’s rather laughable.