

Is Anything Too Hard for the Lord?

Genesis 18: 1-15 Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

A comedian named Hasan Minaj accepted the job of being the featured speaker at the White House Correspondents' Dinner this year. The reason that it was given to someone who doesn't even have his own TV show or iconic comedy movie role like other featured speakers in past years was due to two reasons. First, most of the Hollywood glamorous had decided not to attend because of President Trump. Second, President Trump also decided not to attend, opting to go to a rally in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania instead. Presidents of both parties have gone to this event for decades, getting roasted and even doing some roasting in response. Essentially, that left the hosts and their families and friends, meaning the members of the White House press corps.

That also meant that top flight comedians opted to pass on the event which is one of the toughest jobs to do in god circumstances. It fell to Hasan Minaj, a "reporter" for Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, and he took it.

I don't recall if he mentions the story in his remarks at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, but in his stand-up routine, he tells about his interesting childhood. Born in India, his parents emigrate to the United States. However, his mother has to go back to India to finish medical school. That leaves father and son together in the US for about 8 years. When his mother finally returns home, Hasan gets quite a surprise.

Apparently, on one of dad's trips back to India to see his wife, she became pregnant and would give birth to a daughter. His dad (and mom) decided that since Hasan was having such a rough time in school, being the only brown kid, and didn't have his mom around, it would be best **not** to tell Hasan that he now had a sister. Dads do their best, but sometimes dads can totally miss the boat. Unsurprisingly, mom shows up on her return from India, but this 6 year old girl has come along with mom. Hasan has no idea who this girl is, but the girl knows exactly who he is. She calls out his name and runs to him and hugs him tight. Here was her brother about whom she had heard so much. For Hasan, here was this girl who his mom is now telling him is his sister. Needless to say, it took quite a while to adjust to this new reality, and required working through lots of confused feelings.

That startling news might have been shocking for Hasan Minaj. However, it was probably more shocking for 99 year old Abraham to hear a promise from some strange strangers that his old wife Sarah was going to have a baby when they returned one year hence.

That's our story in Genesis as one day, Abraham notices three visitors coming along the road. He goes out to greet them and invite them in for some simple hospitality. It likely isn't every day that visitors come walking along the road by his place, being in the middle of nowhere. However, he does seem to be going out of his way to get them to stop and sit a spell. His simple offer of bread and drink to them becomes something

entirely different when he instructs his servants. He adds a calf to the cakes, and milk and curds besides water. He's pulling out the stops. He must have recognized that these were special visitors indeed.

They ask where his wife is, calling her by name which one would doubt that Abraham had already revealed to them. "Oh, she's inside the tent," he says. Of course, Sarah's ears pick up at the mention of her name, by these strangers no less. She is all ears now.

The text says: *Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.'* Sarah hears that remark, and she can't help but laugh out loud. I'm guessing it was a loud guffaw before she can stifle herself. Admit it: isn't that what you'd do?

The one who spoke is now referred to in the text as "the Lord." He says, *'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?"* Before Abraham can think of anything to say, the Lord continues: *'Is anything too hard for the Lord?'*

Sarah heard that, too, and perhaps has emerged from the tent to offer an excuse, like, *It was my allergies*, or *I was laughing at something else*, or some other lame cover. Sarah had also figured out that these were no ordinary visitors. She was afraid of what offense she may have caused. But the Lord wasn't letting her off the hook, and said, *Oh, yes, you did laugh.*

Sarah's laughter is never mentioned again until much later in Genesis 21 when she says after Isaac's birth: *God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.* Therefore, we shouldn't read too much into Sarah's laughter. It's nothing more than the natural human reaction to some crazy thing that God has dropped into our laps.

My first example of comedian Hasan Manaj is a case in point, only it didn't bring him any laughter. But that also helps us to contrast a spiritual sense in a faithful adult who responds with laughter at the possibility of God throwing a total curve ball, and an insecure child who receives the same kind of curve ball with intense distress. Circumstances will vary, and no rule or test is being suggested here. I simply want to point out that laughter is a generous and graceful reaction to such remarkable news. We could imagine other reactions.

It would seem from the Lord's chiding about the laughter that her raucous response discloses a strong **dis**belief in what had been promised. Indeed, this promise was totally preposterous. Of course, what we learn in scripture is that God (and Jesus) do some totally preposterous things in totally preposterous ways. God could have seen to her pregnancy at a much earlier and more likely time in her life. No, God waits until she is long past child bearing age.

A lot hinges on that phrase, *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* It's a rather rhetorical question since the answer is quite obviously, 'No, nothing is too hard for God.'

That doesn't make it any less preposterous. We are taught that God will provide in God's own time. We are taught that God's preposterous promises are something worthy of our attention and our faith. We are taught that God is gracious enough to provide at a time when we least expect to be blessed and led into something new and remarkably different from anything we could have imagined. We are taught that God has ways to bring life out of what seems lifeless in ways we could never imagine.

What does all of that, wonderful as it is, have to do with our passage from Matthew.

That passage starts off with Jesus doing his mission among God's people. It says he is teaching and preaching, healing and showing compassion. His spirit was moved because he saw them as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Let's understand this condition of God's people. "Harassed and helpless" is an expression that could easily be trivialized by the comfortable standards we enjoy and the privileged place we have in our society today. The more literal expression of "harassed and helpless" would be "oppressed and thrown to the ground." There is nothing trivial about this. They are supine in their weakness, on their backs, on the ground, pleading for mercy, as it were. They are oppressed, exploited, and exposed, ravaged by the beasts of society who prey on the weak and keep God's people weak, anxious, and needy.

The expression "sheep without a shepherd" is common in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament indicating that a king – the shepherd – has failed God's people, allowing and condoning God's people to be exploited and oppressed, or even directly doing the oppression and exploitation as the king. Ezekiel has damning words for the rulers of his days and how they have failed to care for God's sheep. When we say the 23rd Psalm, *The Lord is my shepherd*, then we should hear the psalmist stating that no earthly ruler or leader is truly lord, but the Lord God is one's true and faithful shepherd who makes all things right and good. In the Kingdom of God, 'the Lord is my shepherd.' "Sheep without a shepherd" is a political phrase that condemns social and political systems that fail to bring healing, justice, peace, and goodness to God's people.

I've spent a bit of time to make sure we understand the condition of God's people because we're going to get one of those often corrupted passages again. It's when Jesus says: *The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field.*

Going back to last week's corrupted crusader version of the Great Commission, here we have the First Commission of Jesus, or rather its prelude. This is the set-up scene which shows Jesus acting in ministry. He remarks that 'the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.' Well, what's the harvest and who are the workers? Those are the questions. In the corrupted crusader version, the harvest fields awaiting is a world of unconverted heathen who need to get right with Jesus, get baptized and be saved. The workers are the missionaries who are going to out and convert those heathen to love Jesus.

Once again, the only problem with that corrupted crusader version is that it doesn't say any of that. Rather, it is Jesus seeing the pain and suffering of God's people who are exploited, oppressed, trapped, and defenseless. Those desperate people of God are the harvest field. The workers are the disciples who will follow Jesus and do ministry to bring new life for God's people. The harvest is new life for God's people. That doesn't mean new life *after they die*. It means new life right now, just the way Jesus did it. It means getting health care and substance abuse treatment, food for the hungry and housing for the homeless, education that's appropriately funded for our children, training for real jobs in a new era of work, fairness and justice in the courts and in the laws and in sentencing. That's a lot of work in ministry. It's a whole lot harder than getting people to love Jesus, and that stuff could get you into plenty of trouble, too.

Let's keep going. In chapter 10, it starts out with Jesus gathering his inner circle of 12 disciples, and giving them "authority to drive out evil and to heal every disease and sickness." That can mean a whole lot of things. What it basically means, particularly in context, is that Jesus is giving them the power and authority to do all the things that he has been doing. They're supposed to teach, preach, heal, and show compassion, knowing that God's people are oppressed, poor, weak, and defenseless, and they're looking for a shepherd – God's people are looking for the servant-workers of the Kingdom of God who bring new life, justice, and peace.

Jesus' instructions return once again to doing the ministry that Jesus had been doing. Again, there is nothing here that would even come close to validating the corrupted crusader view. 'Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and drive out evil.'

The message for them to preach: "The Kingdom of heaven is near." It is not a message of conversion; it is a political and spiritual message. The message is like this: 'Earthly kingdoms have failed you and will keep failing you; the Kingdom of heaven is near, and the Lord is Jesus who has sent me – a servant-worker for his Kingdom, for God's Kingdom.'

The disciples that Jesus would send out today should have basically the same charge put to them. Today's disciples are to do the same work that Jesus did: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and drive out evil. That's preposterous, of course. We can't do all that! We might even have a mocking laugh, just like Sarah. Preposterous! Yet when the power of the Holy Spirit goes ahead, and Jesus promises to be with us, that's exactly what disciples of the Lord are called to do. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* No, of course not.

Today, the harvest fields remain plentiful, but the workers also remain few. God's promise of new life for God's people remains, too. It awaits the work of today's servant-workers of the Lord to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and drive out evil. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*