

Sunday, August 27, 2023
Psalm 100:1-5; Genesis 18:1-15
"Who's laughing now?"

The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

Have you heard about the new Survivor Show they are creating? It just for fathers. It looks like this: Six fathers will be dropped on an island with one SUV and four kids each. Each child plays two sports and either takes music or dance classes. There is no access to fast food. Each man must take care of his four kids, keep his assigned house clean, correct all homework, complete science projects, cook all the food, do the laundry . . . The men only have access to a computer when the kids are asleep and all the chores are done. And there is only one TV between them and no remote. The men must shave their legs and wear makeup daily, which they must apply themselves either while driving or while making four lunches. They must attend weekly school meetings; clean up after sick children at 3:00 a.m.; make an Indian hut model with six toothpicks, a tortilla and one marker; and get a four-year-old to eat an entire serving of peas. The kids vote the fathers off based on performance and the winner, the winner, gets to go back to his job.

Laughter. It feels good, doesn't it? Even in the church. When I was a child no one ever laughed in church. It wasn't that it was depressing or sad, it was just serious. I remember going to my grandfather's church as a child with my family, to hear him preach. He was a Presbyterian Minister for over 50 years. And when he put on his collar and robe, walked up those steps into the pulpit and spoke with a voice that would bellow throughout the room, it was almost frightening. Funny? Never. I couldn't wait for him to come down, take off his robe, pull me onto his lap, tell me a funny story, and be grandpa again.

Well, it's the end of the summer, schools are starting soon, vacations are coming to an end, and so I thought this Sunday would be a good one for us to have Some Holy Humor. I picked this passage from Genesis, because I love the idea of Sarah laughing - at God - with God! And as any parent knows, as any spouse knows, as any person knows, one of the ways to survive in today's world, is to sometimes just stop and laugh.

When I was almost eight months pregnant with our daughter Lee - that was over 30 years ago! - I went to my regular prenatal check-up. This time I met with a doctor who was an **older** member of the group practice. He told me "Everything's coming along fine. Your son's head is down in position and won't be arriving for at least another five weeks." Since this was way back in the olden days when an ultrasound wasn't given unless necessary, I said quite surprised, "My son? Five weeks more? How do you know this?" "Well," he said, "when you've been delivering babies as long as I have, you just know these things."

Now at that time I was working full-time as a Minister of Youth and Families in a church and had youth events planned up until two weeks before our child was due. Well, **THREE days** after that visit to the doctor, three days, SHE flipped into the breech position, and my water broke. At first my husband and I sat there shaking because once your water breaks, no matter what you're having that baby within 24 hours!

I can't be having this baby, I thought, the doctor said . . . and besides, I have too much to do. The Senior High car wash is on Sunday, the Junior High junk sale is next Saturday. My husband

said, you can't be having this baby, I haven't finished painting the nursery, the crib hasn't arrived, and I've got a meeting tomorrow!

Suddenly, we both burst out laughing. What could we do but laugh? There was nothing we could do about it now! We were having this baby! Folks, God has a funny way of working out miracles in our lives and sometimes we just have to laugh. Of course, then the labor pains began and it wasn't so funny anymore, but the next day after the baby was born, I got another laugh when that older doctor came through the door of my hospital room and saw me with my daughter! The look on his face! Who's laughing now? And my laughter had completely changed from that of disbelief in having our child so early, to one of utter joy when I held her. Sarah and Abraham laughed. And their laugh changed too, as God worked a miracle in their lives.

Here in the book of Genesis, God's power and will is revealed to create a new community, a new future. As Theologian Walter Brueggeman states, "The one who calls the world into being now makes a second call. This call is specific. Its object is identifiable in history. The call is addressed to aged Abraham and to barren Sarah. The purpose of the call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing." (1)

Believe it or not, this passage begins with a typical scene of eastern hospitality. In the heat of the day, reclining under a tree near his tent, Abraham suddenly sees men approaching and he runs to meet them. He then runs to tell Sarah to make the bread, runs to the herd to fetch a calf, and his servant hurries to prepare milk and cheese. His haste continues until the men are under that tree eating the food he prepared. You see, back then, a guest was considered sacred and the reception of that guest was to be as lavish as you could make it. Abraham probably didn't even know that they were more than just usual guests, until they asked about Sarah, knowing her name and relation, presumably without ever meeting her. Something was up with that. So picture them reclining under the tree, eating, drinking, and Sarah is nearby listening from the tent.

The news they bring was that Abraham and Sarah's world, which they thought was almost at an end, was about to be shattered by a new possibility, that lied outside all reasonable expectation. But was this all new to Abraham? Not quite, you see, God already appeared to Abraham once before. In Genesis, Chapter 17, God appeared to Abraham and made a covenant with him and the people and gave him the land of Canaan to be their home. And God said, "As for Sarah, I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her." Now, can you guess what Abraham did? He fell on his face and laughed and said, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" He laughed in total disbelief.

So, in this passage Abraham receives this wonderful news one more time! And it's hard to believe that Abraham hadn't already told Sarah of this initial visit from God. Probably from her own disbelief, she too had to hear it one more time. And Sarah laughs but it is a cynical laugh. A disbelieving laugh. Cynical laughter is that "Yeah, right - have a baby now? Switch careers now? Move now? Are you crazy?!" But you know it's the right thing to do, you know it's going to happen, it's just so surprising, so scary, so crazy. And you can't help but laugh.

Think about Sarah and all she had been through. Years of trying to become pregnant in a society where motherhood determined your entire worth. Then she finally sends her maidservant Hagar to conceive a child for her and she thinks of their son, Ishmael as the chosen heir. And now, at what age? God promises they would be parents of a great family, through which all the families of the earth would be blessed. Are you crazy?!

And we all know that cynical disbelieving laughter: If you are a teenager, there are times when you laugh because you think your parents will never understand you. If you are a parent, there are times when you laugh because you wonder if your kids will ever grow up and be on their own. We laugh because we think we will never get out of debt, never get free from our past, never find someone to love, never adjust to all the changes happening around us, never find a place to call home.

As one pastor writes, "We laugh Sarah's laugh, not because we have faith, but because we find it impossible to have faith. That is the disturbing truth being held up before us in this story: that faith is not a reasonable act and that the promise of God is not just a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. Abraham and Sarah laughed because they had reached a dead end in their lives and because they had adjusted to it. They had accepted their hopelessness just the way, if we are honest, we too accommodate ourselves to all those barren places in our lives where the call to believe in 'a new thing that God will do' seems, quite frankly, nonsensical. And yet . . . there is another kind of laughter of which the promise made in this story also points. A very different kind of laughter. The laughter, not of Sarah and Abraham, but of the One who keeps his own counsel and works his own will – whether or not we have the faith to see it. Sometimes we have to wait to share in that kind of laughter, just as Abraham and Sarah had to wait too." (2)

This story is about laughter and faith. Incredible, jubilant faith. You see, faith isn't a reasonable act that fits into our normal scheme of life and perception. It is radical and shatters everything we know. So often we try to fit our religion, our faith, into a neat little box we only open on Sunday mornings. But faith isn't like that and God doesn't act like that. And sometimes we get hit with something very big, very big, sheer joy or immense pain, laughing until we weep, crying until we collapse, utter delight, utter remorse. And we can respond with cynical laughter to ourselves and not believe that we are in the presence of God who is in all this, moving us, transforming us, changing us. Or we can join God in rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. A power which can bring miracles; can bring joy; will bring real change, which can at last bring peace.

And I love how God then becomes the source of laughter when the messenger asks Sarah, "Did I hear you laugh?" And Sarah suddenly realizes that she is in the presence of God and becomes frightened, "No I didn't laugh." And the messenger replies, "O yes, you did. And just for that I'm going to name your baby Isaac, which means 'laughter' just to remind you that the jokes on you. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" As one writes, "Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old age pension for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had, hadn't been half wild enough." (3)

And in Chapter 21 we read that Sarah's cynical laughter turns into evangelical laughter, laughter as a gift. Laughter with eyes filled with tears, laughter of a miracle, laughter from wonderment, new birth. For, "the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised." And nine months later she laughed all the way from the geriatric ward to the maternity ward! And she held the child she only dreamed of having in her arms. And she laughed, for "God has brought laughter for me: everyone who hears will laugh with me."

As one pastor writes, "Most of the time, we are prepared for everything except the possibility that behind the great darkness in which we often live our lives, there is a great light, prepared, says Jesus, to break our backs ploughing the same old field 'til the cows come home without seeing, until we stub our toes on it, a treasure beneath our feet big enough to buy Texas, prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains, but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's, prepared for everything to happen except that which will never happen by our own power and grace, but only by God's . . . until the day does come . . . and 'the something too wonderful' does happen . . . and the laughter of our despair is transformed into the laughter of sheer joy and a newness comes alive within us we never did believe possible."

(4) That's the laughter of knowing God, that's the laughter of having faith.

I read an article this week entitled, "Why Americans are so Awful to One Another" in the Atlantic Monthly. Yes technology, social media, isolation, self-focus, inequality, economic insecurity but the main reason? The main reason people are so mean these days is that people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration – a basic moral education is not taught at home, in the schools and the biggest area: they have stopped going to church. The good news, the really good news is that people are going to figure out they need what we have here and we need to bring them here because we have what they are searching for – meaning, purpose, a higher power, community, love for one another, and the moral and ethical education they desperately need in order to be a society who cares for each other. And I would add – more laughter, fun, hugs, so many hugs!

Sometimes I often wonder what my grandfather would have said if he were alive when I went into the ministry. At first, he probably would have had that cynical laugh because women just weren't in the ministry back then. I laughed too that cynical laughter going into the ministry at first! But now I think we would laugh together because the powerful spirit of God permeates everyone and moves us in the craziest of directions if we are simply open to it. Where is that crazy spirit moving you? Are you ready for that "something too wonderful" to happen to you? Be ready, be open; realize all of life, all of life is on the edge of a miracle; for God just might be smiling on you right now, ready to move your cynical laughter of disbelief into an implausible, unbelievable, ridiculous, miracle kind of laughter which makes you ask, who's laughing now? Wow, I am. Amen.

(1) Brueggemann, Walter. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis, p. 105.

(2) Robinson, Barry J. Keeping the Faith in Babylon: "Something Too Wonderful".

(3) Buechner, Frederick. Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, p. 153.

(4) Robinson