

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. ⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?” ¹³The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Somewhere in the timeline of faith, worship became very somber. It was hellfire and brimstone, damnation and judgment, guilt and confession and shame. Christians were told that fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, which is one way to translate Proverbs 9:10, but not the correct way. We were told that children should be seen but not heard, and so children were given stern orders and threats during worship which led them to associate worship with unpleasant memories. Church was not fun; it was not funny. It was a holy obligation.

Sunday mornings were for serious study, repentance, and contemplation of Christ's suffering. The Bible readings reflect five thousand years of persecution and hardship endured by God's chosen people. It's all very serious stuff, and we're meant to take our faith seriously, no? To enter God's presence with reverence and awe, not to be silly and playful.

But I am convinced that we have swung the pendulum too far in the direction of solemnity. Now, I believe in contemplative prayer, meditation, the holiness of God, the glory of God's presence dropping me into silent and humble genuflection . . . I know when to get serious, but I also resonate with a quote from early twentieth century journalist H.L. Mencken who once said, "God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."

For as much as we are called to take our faith seriously, I also believe that we are called to follow Jesus Christ, who in the Gospels has a great sense of humor and never took himself too seriously, who told jokes and spoke in hyperbolic and playful language.

I truly believe that God has a sense of humor and that being made in the image of God means that we are created to laugh. I mean, if we credit God with creation, then we must wonder what God was thinking when the first platypus was born. I mean, that critter is funny looking.

And if we are made in the image of God, then what else can we assume when we hear Weird Al Yankovic singing parodies called "Amish Paradise" and "White and Nerdy" than that God has an awesome sense of humor.

God made us so that laughter is truly, biologically healthy for us. Laughter is called the best medicine for a reason. It releases endorphins which increase your pain threshold and decrease cortisol which is associated with stress, depression, and exhaustion. Laughter gets your lungs to expand and your heart rate to increase. You can burn calories laughing! The smart part of your brain, the higher functioning part, loves to ponder riddles, jokes, and puns. You get smarter when you consider comedy.

I have depended on laughter so often in my life. I have laughed at jokes, laughed at America's Funniest Home Videos, laughed at late night talk show hosts. Laughed at myself. I was introduced to Monty Python as a child. The Ministry of Silly Walks and Monty Python and the Holy Grail are great stuff! I've watched a bit of the Three Stooges, that slapstick comedy is wild! I grew up with Robin Williams as Mrs. Doubtfire. And I have even learned to laugh at God like when we were told we were having twins – hil-ar-i-ous.

So, I want to get us laughing today because, as Stephen Colbert said three years ago, our faith is supposed to give us such confidence in God's love for us and our eternal destiny that nothing can truly defeat us. Life, scripture shows, is a never-ending set of challenges, but ours is the victory, so we can laugh in the face of fear rather than cower.

Not everyone agrees with me. I know some preachers consider the sermon a time of teaching and education. A serious lecture is all that the congregation should hear. One of those preachers was once in the back of the church after the service, greeting everyone, as we do. Somewhere along the way, a little boy about 6- or 7-years old hands him a crumpled ball of dollar bills. The preacher asks if he meant to put it in the offering plate for the church, and the boy said, "No, this is for you. My daddy says you're really poor preacher."

And I don't know if you've ever been around a church that has a squirrel problem, but there was a squirrel problem in the small town my grandparents grew up in. The squirrels were swarming the parking lots of the Presbyterian, Catholic, and Baptist churches. Great places for them because the lots were empty six days a week and had big, old trees. They were a nuisance. Aggressive. Hungry. The Presbyterians, because they believed in predestination, decided that they were predestined to have squirrels on their

property so they did nothing about it. The Catholics tried to humanely catch them and released them in the city park, but the squirrels came back within a few days. But the Baptists knew what to do. They took a vote and made the squirrels official members of the church, and now the squirrels only show up on Christmas Eve and Easter! Problem solved!

Friends, laughter, in the life of faith, is not frivolous. It is sacred.

Consider Abraham and Sarah. Two weeks ago, we heard the story of God calling Abram and saw his response of faith and action. We noted that Abram was 75 years old, married, childless, and yet God promised him that he would be the father of many nations. Miraculously, Abram believed and began moving toward an unknown future.

Today we jump ahead 24 years. Some things have changed. They are in a new land. They have new names – Abram is Abraham – 99 years old, and Sarai is Sarah – 89 years old. Lot, their nephew, is still part of the family, but Sarah is yet to have a child.

Several years earlier, after waiting about a decade for God to make her a mother, she began to think outside the box. She suggested to Abraham that when God said they would “have a child” God might have meant that Abraham would have a child and she would raise that child, so she encouraged Abraham to use a kind of ancient, slave based surrogate, her servant Hagar, and he did. That boy’s name is Ishmael. At this point in our story, he is thirteen years old.

Abraham comes to believe that Ishmael is the way God will fulfill the promise to be a father to many nations. But God speaks to Abraham in chapter seventeen, when Abraham is 99 years old, and says, “I told you it was going to be the child of you and Sarah. It’s going to happen. Within the next twelve months it will happen.”

And Abraham FALLS ON HIS FACE laughing. Collapses in a heap of “I can’t breathe I’m laughing so hard” laughter. Because he’s 99. Because Sarah’s 89. Because God’s been telling him that he and Sarah would be parents for 24 years. He falls down laughing.

A short time later, in the hottest part of the year, the stifling, sweaty, sunny peak of summer, which we experienced recently, Abraham was sitting in the shade at the opening of his tent, trying to catch a breeze. He sees three figures coming, and he jumps up like he's seen a snake and runs to greet them. At 99. He insists that they rest under a tree, and he scrambles around getting everyone working. He tells Sarah to make bread from 3 measures of flour. Ok. Anyone out there ever looked up what that equates to in modern terms? 3 measures of flour? That might make sense if you think there are three guests, one measure per guest, but 3 measures is actually equivalent to 50 pounds of flour. 50 pounds! That's funny! That's a giant bag of dogfood sized mountain of flour! Enough to feed 100 people! That's funny!

And he gets a slave to prepare a calf. This is a generous meal.

And the three strangers become associated with the Lord. And they know Sarah's name, and they promise that she will bear a child within a year. Now, she's at the tent door, because it's so ridiculously hot, and she laughs at this thought. But the guests insist that it is going to happen. She tries to deny that she laughs, but they know better.

When God promised them a child in their old age, both responded with laughter. Abraham "fell on his face and laughed" (Genesis 17:17), and Sarah, overhearing the promise, laughed to herself in disbelief (Genesis 18:12). Their laughter was not polished or reverent—it was raw, human, and incredulous. And yet, God did not rebuke them or rescind the promise because of their lack of faith. Instead, God met them in their laughter and transformed it into joy.

The child they were promised was named Isaac, which means "he laughs." God didn't just tolerate their laughter—God memorialized it. The very name of their son became a reminder that divine promises often arrive wrapped in absurdity, and that laughter can be the first language of faith. In their laughter, Abraham and Sarah were not rejecting God's promise—they were reacting to the sheer impossibility of grace. And grace, by its nature, is always a little ridiculous.

The boy's name will be "he laughs." Every time they call him to come eat, they'll call the one who laughs, who made them laugh, whose promised existence made them laugh at God.

Laughter is good for the soul. For the brain. For the heart. For burning calories. For not taking ourselves too seriously. For resisting hopelessness. For imagining. For faith.

So let us remember to find joy. Watch the video of Lucy and Ethel stuffing chocolates into their mouths and shirts as they speed down the conveyor belt. Turn on a Robin Williams movie. Find the video of Christopher Walken on Saturday Night Live where he says, "I've got a fever . . . and the only prescription is more cowbell!"

The world right now is a mess. The people of Gaza are starving. The economy swings wildly based on tweets. Natural disasters don't discriminate, and neither does cancer. There's a lot of problems in the world, and over the last 20 or so years, we've stopped listening to opposing viewpoints. So dialogue and researched news are no longer means by which people learn anymore. Writer and comedian Keegan-Michael Key states:

"the Comic has become the truth teller . . . the person who pulls back the curtain . . . [and while] some people can be moved by a wonderful piece of rhetoric, [and] some people can be moved by a stirring speech, everybody can be moved by something that makes them laugh. Everybody."

Think about how ridiculous it sounded to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child at their ages. After 24 years of waiting for God to make good on the promise. They were laughing at God.

Now think how ridiculous it sounds to us to think that God's kingdom could come to this messed up planet we call home. God keeps promising, one day. Just around the corner. I think, sometimes you have to laugh to keep from crying. There's no shame in either. Tears have their place, but let's not solely pray and bow our heads and weep. Let us resurrect our hope through humor. Let us laugh with God, and even at God, and wait for the miracle that will make us laugh like Issac's birth did for his parents. Amen.