

Laughing with God

Genesis 18:1-15

Rev. Shannon White

Wilton Presbyterian Church

June 18, 2017

I'll begin this morning with a story. Some of you have heard it, but it's worth repeating for the sake of this sermon. When I was a hospital chaplain, I went into one of the rooms on my floor one time. An elderly gentleman was in the bed. I had had several really positive interactions with him before, and I really liked this man and his wife. He was on a ventilator and could not speak. That morning, I went over to the bed to lead them in a prayer. All of a sudden, he began motioning, rather vigorously for a white board, which was how he managed his communications. I thought to myself...oh he's so thankful for my ministry, or he's moved by the work we had done to each other.

Then I looked down at what he'd written: "You're standing on my oxygen tube!" Horrified, I jumped back. We all laughed hysterically.

Life is absurd sometimes, isn't it? And in those times, the best response just might be to laugh!

Sarah and Abraham certainly experienced absurdity, right? In our text in Genesis, we have the famous story of the visitation of the three angels to her and Abraham. They were bringing with them the promise of God's Covenant.

To put our story in context, let's review what has happened in the story up to this point. Back in Chapter 12, God called Abram and Sarai (as they were then called) to leave their home and to go out into the unknown to the land God would show them. God promised God's blessing upon them and their future generations.

At the beginning, even though the promise was great, it was more easily accepted, although he was in his mid-seventies, and she in her mid-sixties.

They followed that dream for decades. God continued to come to Abram with the promise. Life went on. Abram would respond, "But I have no heir." You see he and Sarai had had fertility issues. Given the patriarchal ways of thinking and lacking modern understanding of biology, if there were no birth, the woman was blamed. There was no awareness that men could have any responsibility for a woman not having children. Still, God continued with the promise, even as they arrived in their promised land.

OK, Sarai thought. How could this possibly come to be? Then she had an idea. She had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. So, she told Abram to go and conceive a child with her, since Hagar was younger. Maybe this was how God meant the promise to be fulfilled. I mean, come on! She was trying to help God along a bit.

Ishmael was born nine months later. The boy grew and all was relatively well. Abram was now 86, Sarah 76.

Fast forward to Ishmael's 13th year. God returned to Abram and reaffirmed the promise of the covenant made to him, to Sarai and their future generations. The blessing included renaming them as Abraham and Sarah. But here's the thing...God was still stuck on the part of the story which foretold that Sarah would give birth to a child of her own, and it would be through him that the line of blessing would come, not through Ishmael.

Chapter 17:17 says, "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Can Sarah who is 90 years old bear a child?" They understood that Ishmael was the promised one.

Oh no....says God. There will come a time when Sarah will have a child and you will name him Isaac. Woops!

That's where our text comes in. The 3 angels come to Abraham and tell him that it is time for the promise to come to fruition. That meant, of course that Sarah would become pregnant. Now we know, Sarah was well past child-bearing years. When she overheard this news, she laughed to herself. Come on, this was absurd!

Traditional interpretations slam Sarah for having laughed at the thought of this news. Interestingly, they don't give the same response to Abraham when he did the same. (I know this is Father's Day, but I'm not sure I could name a man who would be happy about having a child at age 100!)

Most commentators describe the gottcha moment this way: "Why did Sarah laugh?" Sarah overheard this and defensively said, "I didn't laugh..." "O yes, you did laugh!" (accusingly)

But we don't know the tone that was used. What if it went down like this? ...Sarah, did you laugh? (jokingly) No...I didn't laugh. Grinning. Uh-huh, yes you did! Is anything too wonderful for Me to give to you?

Is it possible for us to envision God as one who playfully interacts with us, and that our humor is a God-given gift to help us deal with life's situations?

Here's why I think that's the case. First of all, when we laugh at the situations in which we find ourselves or even just at ourselves, we are embracing our humanity. We are acknowledging that we are not in control. That we're human, and we are not God. And that's a good thing!

Ironically, this week, NPR's program ON BEING with Krista Tippett was on the topic of humor as a tool for survival! Tippett, as you may know is a Yale Div School grad. I had to listen. The podcast was a compilation of interviews over several years with comedians, journalists and writers who have used humor in their professional lives and personal lives to make sense of life and their personal situations.

Alexis Wilkinson, a writer for VEEP; and the first African American woman to be hired as President of Harvard Lampoon Magazine at age 22 talks of the gift of laughter this way: *I think it gives me release. And you see it in real life, where something really, really bad happens, like, truly bad. You're at a funeral or something, and then you go into the bathroom, wash your hands, and you just spill water all over. And you make eye contact with your aunt or something, and you both just start cracking up uncontrollably and just die. And it's not that that was so funny. It's just sometimes there's just too much tension, or — everything, and you just have to let it go. And I think laughter is such a great natural, physical response to do that.*

Second, laughter and humor open up possibilities and the door to the Spirit to do wonderful things in us and among us.

NPR contributor Sam Sanders, says, *"...It (laughter) gives me connection. Everyone knows how to laugh, and everyone likes to be entertained, and everyone likes to see things that are funny and acknowledge the humor in them. And I cannot tell you how many times laughter has connected me with all different kinds of people throughout the country, of all kinds of political persuasions. And I honestly think that out of laughter, comes love. If I can laugh with you and we can see a commonality in humor, I can see you, and I can respect you, and I can love you..."*

I'll never forget a road trip my family took when I was a child. We were out in the middle of nowhere. My Dad, who was kind of stiff, but had dry sense of humor, suddenly stopped the car in the middle of the highway, got out and started to do the twist to a Trini Lopez song we were listening to on the car radio! I loved him for that!

But laughter can also be a gift to get us through broken dreams and excruciating moments.

New York Times Best-selling author, Terry McMillan talked about how she held onto the dream of the fantasy relationship. *"I have always fantasized about what life would be like when I got married and had kids. I imagined it would be beautiful. I imagined it would be just like it was in the movies. We would fall hopelessly in love...We would have a houseful of kids...I would be a model mother. We would have an occasional fight, but we would always make up. And instead of drying up, our love would grow. We would be one hundred percent faithful to each other. People would envy us, wish they had what we had, and they'd ask us forty years later how we managed to beat the odds and still be so happy..."*

Life didn't turn out that way for her. She says humor gives her hope amid crushed dreams.

"...I think that there is so much ugliness in the world right now and so much sadness every day. And I don't think that humor is a way of pretending that something isn't happening. I don't think

it's evasive at all. On some levels, I think it's a safety net, and it's how we also protect our hearts from just bleeding to death. [laughs]

But humor is healing too. I mean that literally and figuratively. You probably know the story of Norman Cousins, editor of the respected literary magazine *Saturday Review*. In 1964, Cousins was diagnosed an incurable and fatal spinal column illness of unknown cause.

He tried all sorts of alternative remedies with little or no effect on his condition. So, one day, against the advice of his doctors, he left the hospital and closed himself in his apartment for one month doing what he enjoyed most—reading humorous stories and jokes, watching comedy movies and reading his favorite comic books.

He did nothing but laugh and laugh each day for one whole month. He noticed that every time he laughed, his pain was eased. In his book, *The Anatomy of an Illness* he claims it was his laughter which helped him heal, putting his cancer into remission. Miraculous! Spiritual!

Finally, laughter get us in touch very the very creative essence of life, and our God-given gifts. Famed writer of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda* and *James and the Giant Peach*, Roald Dahl, used laughter and fantasy to connect with his children. His youngest daughter with actress Patricia Neale is Lucy, who is now in her 50's. She still bursts with childlike glee when she recalls her father's "midnight feasts" as a child.

"He'd wake the kids up in the middle of the night and pile them into the car" – which was full of hot chocolate and cookies – and drive them up the road in the English countryside where they lived. Then they'd walk in to the woods in their pajamas to look for badgers.

"You couldn't talk, and he'd say, 'Nobody move! And if you've got an itch, blow on it. Try and hold your breath, try not to breathe!'" Lucy recalls. "And sure enough, Mr. Badger would come prowling out and walk right past us. It was incredibly exciting." "And then," Lucy says, "we'd all go home, back to bed, delighted." (Sporkful, NPR)

I'm not sure if Abraham and Sarah were delighted that day they learned they would be parents at such an advanced age, but her lifelong yearning for having a child was finally being fulfilled. And they surely loved their son, Isaac. And God did indeed bless Isaac and his parents for many generations to come.

And indeed this was the first time that a woman was named and brought into the lineage of being part of the Covenant of God in a patriarchal system. God had been faithful to both her and to Abraham in the end, giving them the desires of their hearts. Perhaps the laughter they had along the way helped them through all of those long ordinary days until those promises became reality. Oh, and Ishmael and his mother Hagar were blessed as well.

And why wouldn't God be all for that? I saw a meme which feels appropriate: Happiness is letting go of what you think your life is supposed to look like and celebrating it for what it is! Laughing along with God all the way!!! Amen.