

Sermon “No Laughing Matter”

Sunday, June 18, 2017

Scripture Readings: Genesis 18:1-15, Romans 5:1-5

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Our first scripture reading is Genesis 18:1-15. Last week we celebrated Trinity Sunday. In today’s reading God is among the three strangers Abraham and Sarah welcome. This engaging story was likely told to explain the origin of the name Sarah and Abraham gave to the unexpected son of their later years. Isaac means “the one who laughs” and it seems Isaac wasn’t the only one laughing. Abraham first hears about the birth of Isaac in the previous chapter. We are told he falls on his face and laughs. Apparently Abraham chooses not to tell Sarah and so it is from three strangers that she hears the unlikely news. News she had hoped to hear so many years ago. A disappointment she had finally accepted and now, she also laughs at the possibility of a son called Isaac. Listen for the Word of God.

The LORD appeared to Abraham^[a] by the oaks^[b] of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He 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. ³ He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let 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.” ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures^[c] of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then 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. ⁹ They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰ Then 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. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

If we risk in love, in faith, in being a part of giving life and living life, we will experience laughter as well as tears, joy as well as sorrow. This truth is at the heart of our faith. In our second scripture reading, Romans 5:1-5 Paul explains that the suffering we endure in life not only gives us character but also a hope that will not disappoint us. Listen for the Word of God.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand; and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Amen.

Title of the sermon: "No Laughing Matter"

The text: The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh?' Genesis 18:13

Let us pray. Surprising and Life giving God, we thank you for the laughter and the tears, for the joy and the sorrow that are a part of giving life and living life. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It was at an annual preaching conference, the Festival of Homiletics, held at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago that I encountered a stranger who shared a story with me about an unexpected birth.

I had contacted Jean before the conference in an effort to split the cost of an expensive downtown hotel room. At the age of 67 she traveled alone from rural Colorado to the windy city of Chicago to learn more about the art of preaching. She had served only two years as a Methodist pastor to a small, quaint church near the home where she grew up. Jean set out on a new adventure in ministry the year most people retire.

Our backgrounds were quite different and yet we connected easily and enjoyed the companionship and sharing stories with each other. One of Jean's stories about her mother made quite an impression on me, especially in light of our first scripture reading.

The year was 1938. Her mother had just turned 40 and was anticipating an empty nest with her third and youngest child graduating from high school. She began to feel a queasiness in her stomach and thought perhaps it was the beginning of the time, (as Sarah put it in our scripture reading), *when it ceased to be with her after the manner of women.*

Because the nausea persisted, she finally made an appointment with her doctor. When her husband came home that night, he found his wife quietly rocking herself in a chair and asked, with some trepidation. *What did the doctor say?* She replied simply. *He tried to tell me I'm pregnant.* Not only was she expecting at the age of 40, she was pregnant with twin girls, one of whom was Jean, my roommate in Chicago.

We laugh, perhaps not unlike Sarah and Abraham laughed. But make no mistake, my friends, giving birth to twin girls at the age of 40 after you've raised three children or giving birth to a firstborn son at the age of 90 is NO LAUGHING MATTER.

As I read the stories of Abraham and Sarah laughing at the news that Sarah would give birth to the son whom they had waited and hoped for so long, I couldn't help but wonder about the meaning of their laughter. I am going to have to disagree with Dr. Walter Brueggemann's interpretation that Sarah's laughter is a lack of faith. I think it's more complicated than that. I think it has something to do with the release of nervous tension and disbelief of another sort. This couldn't actually be happening to me.

I think Sarah and Abraham had mourned for years about not having a child together and perhaps just when they had come to terms with the disappointment that would always be theirs; they receive this astonishing and untimely news. Is this a joke? Are we supposed to laugh?

How many times have we found ourselves laughing in those awkward moments in our life together to relieve tension? Or have said something silly and inappropriate when it would have been better not to say anything at all and wish we could take it back. *But Sarah denied saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid.*

Humor is a funny thing and has a multitude of meanings in our lives. Humor can be cruel and humor can be healing. Humor can be fun loving and humor can be poignant. Mark Twain once said that *Humor is the soft edge of truth*. By the time Isaac is born in chapter 21, Abraham and Sarah's awkward and uncertain giggle has turned into a confident and celebrative laughter; and they welcome Isaac, the one who laughs, into the world!

There are powerful feelings around every birth or adoption! Yes, we laugh and we cry. We ask why and we give thanks for the wonder and miracle of life. We pray for wisdom and the energy to endure the sleepless nights and the unending journey we have begun with this little person, this little stranger we do not yet know.

The announcement of Isaac's birth is woven into a story about hospitality and welcoming strangers, nourishing and protecting them while they are in Abraham and Sarah's care until they continue on their journey. This week Westminster welcomed over 80 children, many of whom were strangers from within our community who became our friends during the week they were in our care. We laughed together and, yes, there were a few tears.

Each day during Bible story the children crossed over a bridge (lovingly created by Al Hymans) into the land of Terabithia, a quiet, holy, safe and magical place where we discovered the God who plants seeds of faith within our hearts and where we learned that the kingdom of God has very small beginnings that grow over time with patience and persistence and wonder into the wideness of God's mercy. We learned about the God who seeks us out, who rejoices when we are found, who answers prayers, and who opens doors.

The faith of a mustard seed gives us the courage and strength to face whatever life presents. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, we know that... *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.*

The richness of Paul's theology is the affirmation (the nod) that even in a complicated world that is often unfair and cruel, we have a loving God who is totally for us. *For I am convinced, the Apostle Paul writes, that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This perspective allows us to live lives that accept the challenges, the struggles and the surprises along the way, as well as receive strength and character through them. Yes, hope will not disappoint us. We can welcome the stranger, the sojourner within our gates, we can recognize the suffering in life that is no laughing matter and we can cry in the arms of our loving, Creator God.

Is anything too wonderful in our Father's world? Amen.