

“Go Ahead and Laugh”
Genesis 18:1-15
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First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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When we lived in Richmond, Virginia, I ate lunch quite often at a diner near the church I served. It was operated by a woman who used to operate another diner with her husband until they divorced. Their loss was the city’s gain of another diner with good food and friendly service.

There was a waitress there who was a character. She was probably the one who brought in the sign that read, “Thank you for not whining.” One day when I sat down, she said, “Well, I guess you’ve heard the news.” “No,” I said. “I’m pregnant,” she said, at which point I laughed, because she was in her fifties, she had a thirty-one-year-old daughter and elementary-aged grandchildren. “Go ahead and laugh,” she said, “It’s funny, real funny,” at which point I realized she wasn’t kidding.

She ended up doing fine with the pregnancy. It was a front-page story in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, “Grandmother Becomes Mother Again!” And she was back at work in two weeks. But what a shock it was. “Go ahead and laugh,” she said with some derision, a measure of resignation and a bit of authenticity. What else could you do?

It was a situation very much like the one described in our reading from Genesis. Several chapters earlier God calls Abram, as he is known then, to leave his home in Haran and go to a new land where God will make a great nation of him. The trouble is many years later, he and his wife Sarai, as she is known then, have no children. It’s kind of hard to give birth to a nation full of descendants without having a single child.

Sarai comes up with a plan. She gives her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to Abram, and they have a child named Ishmael. But God insists that this is not the solution. God will make a great nation of Hagar’s child too, but the initial promise is still good and it applies to Abram and Sarai, who are eventually known as Abraham and Sarah. The trouble is they have no children and Sarah is now 90 while Abraham is 100. They are preparing for a retirement community, not a birthing center!

As we join the story today, three men appear near Abraham and Sarah's home by the oaks of Mamre at Hebron. They are heavenly creatures, angels, representatives of God, but Abraham doesn't realize this. Fortunately, he offers them hospitality and after some refreshment, they say that when they are in this area again, Sarah will have had a son.

Sarah, who has overheard the conversation, laughs to herself. The very idea of having a child now... Lest we think she is being picked on here, somewhat like Eve in an earlier story from Genesis, when Abraham is first given this news in the previous chapter, he falls on his face laughing. God tells him his wife Sarah will bear a child and he will be named Isaac, which means "He laughs." Now, God asks Abraham why Sarah laughs. Well, Abraham doesn't say it, but the very idea is pretty funny! But God says, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

So, both Abraham and Sarah laugh at the news they receive and while God asks why, God doesn't zap them for laughing. In fact, God seems to go along with their response in naming the child Isaac. I imagine God smiling here because the very idea of people their age having children is funny, at best... Sarah may have a few other responses at this point in life. "Go ahead and laugh," God seems to say, "Laugh because it is funny, but know it will still happen."

Part of the message here for us is an affirmation of laughter in all places of life, even in relationship to our faith. Some things are just funny and it is "O.K." to laugh. Indeed, we better hope God laughs at some of our more awkward moments in life.

I may have told some of you about an ultimately humorous experience that took place during a youth retreat I led in the summer of 1983. We took about thirty Junior High students, as we called them then, from Louisville, Kentucky to the Otter Creek State Park near Fort Knox on the Ohio River.

All in all, the retreat went well, but during a break time, three eighth-grade boys, one a seminary professor's son, snuck off to skinny dip in the river. They kept their underwear on, thank goodness, since some eighth-grade girls were watching from the bank, but right where they swam was posted a large sign which read, "No Swimming!"

They were having a great time until the Park Ranger came and ordered them out of the river. He pointed to the sign, told them what law they had broken and said he would take them to juvenile detention. They said he couldn't because they were with a church group. "Sure..." he said. "No, really!" they insisted. "Sure..."

So, at this point, while standing on the banks of the mighty Ohio River in their wet underwear, three eighth-grade boys who had never sung a note before with the youth group proceeded to sing "Father Abraham" with all the verses and all the motions. It convinced the Ranger who brought the boys back to our lodge with this story. Who said going to church doesn't have practical benefits? It kept these guys out of detention. "Father Abraham" saved the day.

It was a learning experience with a serious side. We had a lengthy conversation about laws and safety. But it was a funny experience, there was a lot of laughter, there is still a lot of laughter to this day.

Some things are just funny and the truth is we need laughter not just in the lighter moments of life, but in the more serious moments as well. We can't cry all the time and sometimes laughter is healing. For example, when Dana's mother died, she was living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She was buried in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. When talking about how to get her body there, we discovered that flying her there would be less expensive. The trouble was she hated to fly. But it was less expensive. So, we flew her body there, laughing under our breath about how she would come back to haunt us for this decision.

That time was filled with a powerful mixture of emotions. We were saddened by her death, but relieved that her struggle with dementia in addition to physical challenges was over. We were consumed by grief and utterly exhausted. We needed a reason to laugh and found it.

Laughter can be healing. It is "O.K." to laugh in all circumstances of life, even in the presence of God. Abraham and Sarah both laugh when God says they will have a son at their age. Who could blame them? God doesn't, though God is serious about the promise of a son.

But this is not the only message for us in this story, an affirmation of laughter. There is something else here that helps us move from

superficial, momentary laughter to deep down trust and rejoicing. For this story is a comedy in the classical sense. It ends on an upturn, a happy note. A child is born to Abraham and Sarah, his name is Isaac, and thus, the promise of founding a great nation can and will be fulfilled.

The very idea of people their age having a child is hilarious, but “is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” God asks. In other words - is anything impossible for God, especially something God has promised? Of course not, as this story proves.

The message for us is that we can not only laugh out-loud in all circumstances of life, but smile deep down in our hearts because we know of God’s love for us and we trust in God’s ability to provide what we need, not everything we want, but everything we need.

Our High School graduates shared stories in worship last week which affirmed this reality in their lives. Different speakers in different ways talked about challenges they had faced and how their trust in God grew because God provided a way forward – not exactly what they wanted always, but still something good.

It was a wonderfully-led service which affirmed the depth and substance of our youth ministry as well as the reflective capacity of our youth. Despite all claims to the contrary, the church is in good hands with this next generation as are parts of Charlotte and New York where many of our youth will serve this next week.

But it’s not just our youth who can talk about experiences of challenge which deepen trust. We have all had experiences like this, times when we thought there was no hope, but God surprised us in some way, leaving us shaking our heads and smiling deep down, laughing at ourselves for ever doubting, rejoicing at God’s faithfulness.

I had lunch with a friend this week who was diagnosed with a form of cancer this past year. Though it was caught early, it seemed like a tough challenge until further testing identified another, more threatening form of cancer that is usually not diagnosed early enough. Because of the first diagnosis, testing was done that revealed the second, far greater concern, and thus treatment was possible.

Not every illness is diagnosed and I don’t believe God intervenes directly to help some and not others. But what my friend experienced

was a blessing for him. Sometimes good news comes in surprising packages. God is always good to us in some way.

Sometimes this surprising goodness works in relationships. We hit a rough spot and think the brokenness is irreparable, and it may be. There are times when people need to go their separate ways. But sometimes healing takes place when we never thought it was possible. Sometimes God uses a point of apparent weakness to make room for grace and growth. And sometimes relationships that end are rekindled years, even decades, later – relationships between parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, even fellow church members.

In one marriage I performed in another setting, the couple was remarrying, each other. They had been married for 30 years, then divorced for 10 and now they were remarrying. The family thought they were crazy, but after all those years apart, they realized they still loved each other. There was a lot of laughter that day, I can assure you, as well as deep joy in the center of two hearts.

Sometimes we think all hope is lost, but life surprises us, God surprises us, and after we have enough experiences like this, we come to greet any new challenge in a different way – with concern, with a desire to address the challenge, but also the trust somewhere deep down that God is still at work and thus, we can smile not derisively, but genuinely.

The film *Hidden Figures* tells the real-life story of three African-American women with incredible math skills who help NASA get a man in space. They face incredible challenges in the 1960's as women and African-Americans. They are laughed at derisively, even by friends, at the very idea that they can work for NASA and be valued for their work.

But they persevere and in the end, they each play a critical role in getting a man in space. One is a human computer, one becomes an engineer, one leads a team which figures out how to use computer technology for the flight. They succeed because they believe in themselves, in their potential as human beings and children of God, and they laugh a lot along the way and smile deep down in their souls.

One Friday night my freshman year in college I was playing my guitar in my dorm room with my door open, sipping on a cup of Earl

Grey tea when a man my parents' age knocked repeatedly on the door across the hall. Finally, I stopped playing, got up and said to the man, "If you are looking for Todd Struttman, if he is not in his room studying, he is probably at the library studying. Todd is always studying." "Well," the man said, "Some people have objectives in life," and off he walked, I assume to the library.

Some people have objectives in life... I thought I had objectives, I just had a life as well, and a sense of humor, which this man clearly did not, which was quite ironic, given his name, which I did not know at the time. Todd's family was Catholic, and his father was born on Saint Hilary's Day, but they didn't realize Hilary was a man. So, they named him, I kid you not – Hilarious. Well, obviously he was not, but his name was, and oh, the irony of our exchange!

There are two categories of people I really struggle to relate to; I am a Christian and a minister, so I try to relate to everyone; but there are two groups which challenge me – people who don't like dogs and people who have no sense of humor. In regard to the latter, I mostly feel sad because laughter is such a gift, when we are happy, and even more so, when we are sad. Furthermore, there is always cause for rejoicing deep down because no matter what is going on in our lives and world, God is still at work for good.

So, go ahead and laugh, I say, go ahead, especially when the laughter is not mean-spirited or derisive, but comes from the bottom of a generous heart and the depth of our soul. Laughter is appropriate in all experiences of life, with a measure of sensitivity, even in the presence of the Almighty, because, after all, this is the God who creates the whole world with all the creatures in it, including giraffes and anteaters and human beings; this is this God who turns even the cross into a symbol of hope; this is the God who laughs all the way to an empty tomb and beyond. There is almost always room for laughter. Abraham and Sarah laugh. So can we.