

“Laugh With Me”

Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)

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.
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.

He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you,
do not pass by your servant.

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet,
and rest yourselves under the tree.

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.”

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said,
“Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it,
and make cakes.”

Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good,
and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.

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.

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?”

And he said, “There, in the tent.”

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.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age;
it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.
So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old,
and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"

The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh,
and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'
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."
But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid.
He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said,
and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised.
Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age,
at the time of which God had spoken to him.
Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.
And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old,
as God had commanded him.
Abraham was a hundred years old
when his son Isaac was born to him.

Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me;
everyone who hears will laugh with me."
And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham
that Sarah would nurse children?
Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Laugh With Me

Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)

June 14, 2026

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

It has often been said that laughter is the best medicine. Seems to me, that in a world that is angry, hurting, and afraid, a bit more laughter might be just what the doctor ordered for that which ails us (or this preacher, in any event). As it turns out, modern science and medical research have, in fact, established the veracity of this old adage. Laughter draws people together in ways that trigger healthy physical and emotional changes in the body. Laughter strengthens our immune system, boosts mood, diminishes pain, and protects us from the damaging effects of stress. Nothing works faster or more dependably to bring our mind and body back into balance than a good laugh. Humor lightens our burdens, inspires hope, connects us to others, and keeps us grounded, focused, and alert. Laughter also helps us release anger and forgive sooner.

II.

The power of laughter has been long known across every age and culture, and is the most ancient of human wisdom. In Proverbs 17:22 we read: “*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*” Interestingly, and unfortunately, the Bible is woefully short of instances and usage of the word “laughter.” In fact, depending on the translation, in all of scripture there are only 41 or 42 appearances of the word. Worse, every instance in the New Testament references laughter that is scornful or derisive; to laugh *at*, or to *be* laughed at, rather than to laugh *with* someone or have others laugh with us. Not the kind of laughter we are seeking, and certainly not the kind of laughter we need right now in our lives.

III.

Though I only have anecdotal evidence to support such a claim, my experience is that laughter is harder to come by the older one gets. Late afternoon this past warm and wonderful Tuesday evening I was sitting on the dock relaxing. It had been a very long day for me and I had just settled down

to do a crossword puzzle and enjoy some peace and quiet. Suddenly, I heard this big splash and the another, and then another, and then *peals* of laughter. Turns out, some of the neighbor kids were swimming a couple of camps down from us. They were Tweeners, 11 or 12 years old, and all they did was laugh. Like it was their job. They laughed at everything and they laughed at nothing. Soon, with the way sound travels over water, the entire lake was swimming in the laughter of children, and I started laughing right along with them.

IV.

Laughter is contagious. Whereas boundless energy is certainly the special purview of the young, laughter knows no such boundaries. At least it shouldn't. Nonetheless, while children need only the *slightest* provocation to tickle their funny bone, it seems the older one becomes so too grows a dullness in the sensitivity of that particular area. More often than not, adults are prone to subscribe to the Queen Victoria approach, "*We are not amused.*"

Personally, one of my all-time favorite things to do is to laugh; especially, to do so until I quite literally cry. I had such a laughing fit recently watching [the "nut" scene](#) (pine nuts, pistachio nuts) from the movie "Best In Show" (about the contestants of a fictional Dog Show competition, you really need to watch the whole movie to get the full effect; caution there are some "mature" elements, I have it on DVD if any would like to borrow it). Makes me chuckle even now just thinking about it.



V.

Beyond certain movies and comedians, I find the defining characteristic of my oldest and closest friends is their ability to make me laugh in side-splitting ways. Part of it is a having a large body of shared experience upon which to draw, and a well established history of symbols, stories, and phrases with which to communicate. Another part of it, though, is many years of practice at simply discovering the humor in common everyday experiences motivated by the glee to be gained in gladdening the hearts of those dear to us. I also find one of the defining characteristics of our congregation is the ease with which we laugh together; it is a rare treasure. There is not a Sunday that goes by when I do not sit down in my office to review my sermon before worship

and get tickled at the laughter I hear coming from the foyer as folks walk in and greet each other with fondness. There is no better way to prepare oneself for worship than to do so with laughter and its sweet sound.

VI.

Moreover, what is even more unique about our congregation, in my opinion, is the profound desire to laugh *with* each other as a means of celebrating the common journey on which we have embarked together. I have never once, in two decades, heard laughter come at the expense of another. Even more rare, is the ability we have to laugh *at ourselves*. Most assuredly the hallmark of a mature faith.

Today's scripture reading from the 18th and 21st chapters of Genesis is part of a larger and longer story about Sarah and Abraham learning to laugh at themselves and the maturation of their faith. Moreover, if seen in a certain light, this is also a story which reveals God's own somewhat quirky sense of humor.

VII.

This particular part of the Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah saga is often referred to as the story of the three visitors. The arrival of these way-faring strangers serves to remind Abraham and Sarah of the three-fold promise made to them in Genesis 12: God promised them that they would have land, that their descendants would be so many as to become a "*great nation*," and that in them "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." However, Abram and Sarai (as they were then known) were not able to conceive a child. Such a promise seemed laughable. Years go by, and much occurs along the way, but still there is no child. Then, on one particularly starry, starry night, God renews the promise. In Genesis 15 God says, "*Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them, so shall your descendants be.*" Yet Sarai remained barren, and they grew older still.

VIII.

Eventually, Sarai tires of the waiting for the child God has promised. In Genesis 16 she suggests that Abram conceive a child with their servant, Hagar. She bears the child Ishmael, purportedly when Abram was 86 years old, whose descendants would also go on to number as the stars in the sky (it

is understood these “Ishmaelites” would become the Arab people). However, this was *not* the child of God’s promise, the child of both Abram *and* Sarai; so the promise remained unfulfilled.

Then, in Genesis 17, God appeared again to Abram to repeat the promise yet another time. God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, “*for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.*” Moreover, God made it clear that Sarai was part of the covenant, as well: “*Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her.*” Abraham’s reaction was immediate and obvious, he fell on his face and *laughed*.

IX.

Eventually, the laughter fades and the years go by once again. Then, one day, three visitors appear on the road; strangers to Abraham and Sarah. It is important to note the significance of what came next, as without the hospitality shown the visitors by Abraham and Sarah the story might have turned out *much* differently. In the biblical world, hospitality was one of, if not *the*, chief social virtue. Far more than a matter of simply being polite, it was a moral expectation and understood, even, as one’s “sacred duty.” Hence, water for washing is provided and a shaded place to rest indicated. Bread is made, a calf prepared, and served along with milk and cheese. Abraham and Sarah roll out the red carpet. Soon, though, the interaction takes a decidedly unusual twist, as it becomes obvious that these are no run-of-the-mill travelers, but divine messengers and, evidently, the actual Divine.

X.

One of the visitors we suppose to be God repeats to Abraham the long-held promise of a child, but now with timeframe attached, “*I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.*” All the while this is going on, Sarah is in a tent away from the conversation. She has heard this old song and dance before, and so she “*laughs to herself*” at the preposterousness of it all (more literally translated as “inside of herself” or “in her guts”). Sarah murmurs under her breath, “*After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?*” Now, one can hardly blame Sarah for reacting in such a way. What kind of promise is harder to believe than a promise that has been repeatedly left unfulfilled? The whole *situation* is laughable.

XI.

Though many read what is to follow as a chastening of Sarah for her laughter, at least she had the good manners to keep her laughter hidden away and to herself (or *in* herself). In contrast, Abraham, upon hearing the same promise in Ch. 17, was essentially rolling on the floor right in front of God. Perhaps not surprising, but certainly a bit more uncouth than Sarah's reaction. Leaping ahead, now, to the 21st chapter of Genesis, our story takes a dramatic turn. At long last, God kept the promise and dealt with Sarah as was said. Sarah did, in fact, conceive and bear Abraham a son in his old age, and at the time of which God had spoken. Abraham and Sarah named the child Isaac, which in the Hebrew *Yiṣḥāq* (יִצְחָק) literally means "He laughs/will laugh." Abraham circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Remarkably, we are told, Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. And the rest, as they say, is history.

XII.

Of course, there is so much more to the story. God's demand that Abraham sacrifice this long-promised son as a sign of his faithfulness to God. Then, God sparing Isaac at the last possible second and providing a ram to sacrifice in his place setting the (a)tone(ment) for the future. Isaac went on to marry Rebekah and give birth to Jacob (of the ladder) who, through great guile, stole the birthright of his older, twin brother Esau. Jacob had 13 children by wives Leah and Rachel, as well as handmaidens Bilhah and Zilpah, 12 of whom were sons and the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel, and one of whom was a daughter, Dinah, who has a remarkable story in her own right. (Sojourner Truth, an American abolitionist and women's rights activist, in a speech at the 1850 Woman's Rights Convention invokes the name of Dinah to symbolize Black Womanhood.). Dinah is referenced in Matthew chapter 1 when we are told Jesus is descended from the house of Judah, one of Jacob's sons. Such a promise, such a story, such a history.

XIII.

Of course, the promise took so very long to be fulfilled; and, then, only just barely. The story became convoluted, messy, muddy, tragic, terrible, tumultuous, almost forgotten, revived from time to time, renewed, and refined from generation to generation as it unfolded in ways which were anything but what was expected. The history was dark, one of woe as much as triumph,

came at great cost, was filled with suffering, hardship, and punishment for injustice, moved far beyond borders or any one culture, confronted great evil and perpetuated its own fair share and, to this day, is still being written. Through it all, amazingly, the promise has held.

XIV.

As we drawn near to the 250th anniversary of the founding of our own nation and exam our own history so as to hold on dearly to the promise of our own inception, we would do well to remember the story of Abraham and Sarah and the lessons it has to teach us. Specifically, the incredible effort required to live long years with what seems an impossible hope in a promise left unfulfilled. Moreover, the sacred duty of offering hospitality, succor, and compassion to those unknown and unbeknownst to us, and the true joy to be found in living one's life for what others tell us is patently laughable. The laughableness of a couple bearing a child in their old age who would give rise to a nation, and the Savior of *all* the nations.

The laughableness of the grand experiment to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. The laughableness of faith in the cross of Christ to atone for our sin as individuals, as a nation, and as the "crown of creation," and in bringing healing and wholeness to the entire world. And, the laughableness of the hopes and dreams of one small congregation in Canton, New York in serving the both the Promise and the Promise Keeper.

XV.

In considering the events of these weeks, these few months, the last 250 years, as well as the eons stretching back to an old couple entertaining three visitors on the side of the road, I am made to wonder what the future holds for my family, our church, our nation, and this world. As I'm sure you do as well. What is the promise to which we cling? Certainly not one that can be demanded or contrived, or necessarily deserved. Surely not a promise that can be crafted by human hands, let alone fulfilled by them. Instead, it is a promise which, especially these days, seems too wonderful to us. Nevertheless, it is to this we will hold fast, and in this our faith will abide. Is anything *too* wonderful for the LORD?

Returning finally to our story, it seems clear that for Sarah there were some things, laughable things, that are too wonderful for the Lord. But God, with a quirky sense of humor, had the last laugh as Sarah was finally made to say, *“God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will...laugh with me.”* Amen.