

## **“Who Has the Last Laugh?”**

June 18, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

*Text: “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.’”*

Genesis 15:13-15; NRSV



[Image Credit: Tom Lovell (American, 1909-1997), “Three Strangers Reveal the Future to Abraham” Note Sarah listening from the tent in the background! ]

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Notice in the painting above where Sarah is – peeking out from the tent in the background – many times, women, like Sarah, are in the background of Holy Scripture’s narratives, but not here in Genesis 15! The focus of the story is Sarah and her reaction to the words she heard: *Sarah laughed*.

We laugh for any number of reasons.

Ron Champ posted on Facebook the other day something that made me laugh when I read it: He said if one is bored, take an empty mayonnaise jar (with label clearly visible); fill it with vanilla pudding; sit somewhere in public; and eat the pudding from the jar! That's a quirky kind of amusement!

The text from Genesis says, "*Sarah laughed.*" Even though she denied it, God said to her, "*But you did laugh.*"

There are all kinds of reasons why we laugh:  
There's the "I just heard an off-color-joke-laugh;"  
There's the "That's not remotely funny, but you are my boss laugh;"  
There's the "Even though you are my spouse, that's still not funny at all laugh;"  
There's the "You're making me nervous and I'm not sure what's going on laugh;"  
There's the "This is between us kind of life;"  
There's the "Fall-down-red-in-the-face-I-can't-breathe-and-my-stomach-hurts laugh;"  
There's the "Giddy, 2 AM, nothing is funny, but that makes everything funny kind of laugh . . .

And then there's the nervous, you have to be kidding; I don't believe it, kind of laugh . . .  
Sarah laughed. And what was she thinking and feeling when she did so – especially, if a moment later, she tried to deny she had?

You've done that haven't you? Something happens at the dinner table to one of your parents – since it's Father's Day: something like Dad slicing a turkey leg right off the table – and you start to laugh, but stifle it immediately. . . Dad has had a bad day . . . You and your siblings look to each other in absolute hilarity, but Dad is not in the mood – "Stop laughing!" he barks. You deny it, through clenched teeth and red cheeks . . . "Stop it! It's not funny!" But then Mother breaks the dam wide-open and says, "No dear, it's not funny, it's a turkey-leg and it's now on the floor." Well that does it – everybody lets loose . . .

And even though the joke is really on Dad, it's everyone's to enjoy!

God wasn't angry with Sarah – he was just getting her to come clean. Because even though she was laughing – nervously – at God's word, the joke was ultimately on her.

When God's messenger asks, "Is anything too hard for the Lord;" the one who laughs last, laughs best – even if it is to bless a barren old woman and her old-sack of a husband with a baby . . . "After I am an old worn-out woman, and my husband is wrinkled head-to-foot, am I now to have pleasure? – You have to be joking!"

You have to wonder at God's sense of timing: Abraham was told he would be father of many nations, but at 100 years of age? I think it points as much to God's sense of humor!

Actually, we do well to put a smile on God's face and fill his universe with the sound of laughter much more than we do. We think God is so serious all the time that laughter is out of order in the heavenly places – like the approach of Dorothy and her friends down the long hallway to see the Wizard of Oz the first time . . . but we couldn't be more wrong!

Look at Judges 6:11-16 –

*"11Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezerite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. 12The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.' 13Gideon answered him, 'But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.' 14Then the Lord turned to him and said, 'Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.' 15He responded, 'But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.' 16The Lord said to him, 'But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.'"*

The passage is from the Book of Judges. The judges were spirit-filled men and women who were raised up by God to fill a need in the lives of the people of Israel from time-to-time. The judges ruled in the time after Israel had settled in the Promised Land and before the ages of monarchs who would come to rule them.

The joke here is this: God has chosen to raise Gideon up as a judge, but where is he? He is hiding out in the wine press treading out the grain! You don't tread grain in a wine press! But the wine press was hidden from view . . . He was a hiding from the Midianites . . . What we have here is a fearful man. And how does God approach him? "*The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.*" Do you see the humor of it? Gideon is not mighty, but he will be – God knows it, even if Gideon does not.

*"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"*

We see the incongruity; we laugh at the juxtaposition of elements – like a mayonnaise jar filled with vanilla pudding; we often laugh at impossibilities and odd juxtapositions.

We laugh when things don't fit – like the turkey-leg on the floor – or when old women are told they will become new mothers! God's ways are higher and different than our ways. . . He puts things together that don't seem to fit – maybe God loves square pegs in round holes? It's funny, really! Could anyone imagine chicken-hearted Gideon becoming a mighty man of valor, a mighty warrior, to come to the aid of his people?

God comes to us in our frailty and foibles and gives us his grace so that we can be more! Instead of laughing at us, God invites us to laugh with him! Instead of incongruous laughter, we take on the laughter of belief . . . The narrative begun, here, in Genesis 15, comes to fruition in Genesis 21:1-7 –

*The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. 2Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. 4And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' 7And 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.'*

Hebrew is a very onomatopoeic language – its words often formed from the sound they make. "Isaac" in Hebrew sounds like an explosive belly laugh – "Yitz-ahhk" – and means "laughter." As Kathryn Scifferdecker, says in commenting on Genesis 15:

*Abraham falls on his face in a fit of laughter. Sarah laughs behind the tent door. And the LORD (I believe) laughs with them at the divine, wonderful absurdity of it all. Given the humor of the scene under the oaks of Mamre, and the comedy of a God who acts in unexpected ways to fulfill God's promises, it is entirely appropriate that the child of the promise ['Isaac'] should be named 'Laughter.'"<sup>i</sup>*

Here's a joke for you, you'll find it covered in our reading from the Gospel of Matthew 10:1-4 –

*"1Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. 2These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him."*

The Church that Jesus pulls together begins with a motley crew of twelve people. Four were fishermen – not used to being in the public eye (and one of them denied he knew Jesus three different times). . . A tax collector – hated by most Jews because he often was a collaborator with the Romans . . . Another was a zealot – a firebrand – that liked to cause trouble more often than not . . . One of them betrayed the boss for money. . . Can you believe it? Rather absurd . . . Funny!

And here we all are 2,000 years later – the Church of Jesus Christ – many disciples from many nations.

And who is it that has the last Laugh?

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Kathryn M. Scifferdecker, in commentary for Genesis 18:1-15 and 21:1-7 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).