
It's Lent, So Laugh a Little – Really!

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Lent 2 – Year B

The Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Genesis 17:1-2

It seems so serious.

The Lord announced a covenant. Abram became Abraham, and Sarai became Sarah. A new future was promised.

A covenant is more than just a promise, though.

It's more like a wedding vow. It's a bond of love and trust that defines those who commit themselves to it. It's mutual and it's open-ended.

In other words, it's not enough for the Lord to choose Abram and Sarai. They must also choose the Lord.

It's their response to the Lord that I find revealing and, well, funny.

Abraham and Sarah were each almost one hundred years old. They had long since gotten over their grief about not having had a child of their own. Then, the Lord appeared. The message – “good news, you are going to have a son!”

Really? A son? Now?

Abraham laughed. He fell on his face out of respect, and then he fell out laughing.

It gets even better.

Three mysterious strangers, who turn out to be messengers of the Lord, also appeared to Abraham. He fed them and then they too told him that he and Sarah were going to have a son. This time, Sarah overheard the conversation, and had the same reaction as her husband.

She laughed.

The Lord asked Abraham why Sarah laughed. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Sarah was afraid. “I did not laugh,” she said.

“Oh yes, you did laugh,” the Lord answered.

Sarah and Abraham had the promised son at the promised time, of course. They named him *Yitzaḥ*, which means either “He laughs” or “He will laugh.”

“God has brought laughter for me,” Sarah rejoiced. “Everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

People in religious circles have not always found laughter to be so funny. It has often been frowned upon because it can involve the loss of self-control and the breaking of social rules. And, admittedly, we do sometimes wield it as a weapon.

Laughter can serve as a shield to put some distance between us and our fears. Pay attention the next time you are in a group and the emotional heat gets turned up a little. The conversation starts to make you feel uncomfortable, as if someone is shining a light in the dark closet where you keep the most revealing things about yourself. The most anxious person in the group will often crack a joke. Everyone laughs. The light switches off. The door to the closet closes. Crisis avoided.

Sometimes, of course, we need the protection. We need laughter to release the anguish and pain that is dammed up inside of us. And, we need laughter to remind us that tragedy is not going to get the final word.

“Really, God?” we jokingly ask. “After the last year, you think this is a good idea?”

But, other times, we are just avoiding the hard work of facing our fears.

Laughter can also be used as a sword to cut our enemies down to size. Against the powerful, it may be the only weapon that we have. When used to attack the powerless, though, it can be just another form of cruelty.

Pay attention the next time you sense that someone is being belittled just for entertainment. It might start to look like a scene you recognize. You might see taunting soldiers carrying a purple cloak and the crown of thorns. You might hear deriding passers-by shouting things like, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross.” You might recognize mocking chief priests and scribes saying things like, “He saved others; he cannot save himself.”

Abraham’s and Sarah’s laughter sounds like it served as both a shield and a sword. It’s a little defensive. Their hopes for a son had no doubt been stowed away at the bottom of an old barrel long ago. And, it has a mocking tone. There’s a reason that Sarah denied having laughed.

Joyful laughter, though, is at the center of the spiritual life.

It’s not hard to see why this is true. It’s hard to think of a good time that we have had with friends when we didn’t laugh. Laughter can be playful enough to let us sneak up on our fears, and inviting enough to coax us into making friends out of our enemies.

Pay attention the next time you find laughter unexpectedly connecting you to someone else: the irresistible cooing that gurgles out of a baby when you make just the right face; or the revealing chuckle that sneaks up on you when you hear a good country song title; or the infectious belly-laughter that erupts among friends in a spirited dinner table conversation.

This is what new life sounds like.

It’s a sign of the presence of God. And, it often reveals the truth in a way that we can take. It can give us the courage to be vulnerable, even create the space to confess some of our less favored emotions.

I mean, is it just me, or have you ever noticed on the connector that everybody going faster than you is a maniac, and everyone going slower than you is a moron?

And, who is it exactly, who thinks that the secret to a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, and to have the two as close together as possible?

This, I suspect, is why Abraham and Sarah named their son Laughter. Laughter is a natural response to the surprisingly incongruous nature of truth. And, their son was the joy that redeemed their defensive, mocking disbelief.

I realize that Lent is our time to walk with Jesus, to prepare for his resurrection and ascension by experiencing his death. And, we are all trying to take our disciplines seriously. Looking serious, though, is not the same thing as being serious.

Laughter has the ability to show us things as they really are, particularly things about ourselves that we would rather not see.

This is what Easter is about – the irresistible, revealing, infectious laughter that bursts into the world, shining light into the darkness, surprising us with joy, and lifting us up in hope.

So, go ahead. Laugh a little.

It's alright. Really.

Don't worry that the sounds of laughter might not be the response that God was expecting.

Nothing is too wonderful for the Lord!

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