

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 6A
Sermon 6.18.23

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1, 6

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. Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff;

for labourers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (930)

I am a strong advocate for laughter. I know, it’s a courageous stance. You’re probably thinking, “Wow, that Liz is really willing to put herself out there.”

There’s this book. Written in 1967, *The Joke* by Milan Kundera presents a man who wrote a letter in response to a woman, a joke. This is the Soviet era in what is now the Czech Republic, what was then Czechoslovakia. So, this man writes back to this woman a joke about living under the Soviet regime, a most innocuous joke, not even that funny a joke. One person writing to another person that “Optimism is the opium of the masses. A healthy spirit stinks of stupidity!” See, to be a good Soviet is to be without optimism for to be optimistic is to be stupid and to be a good Soviet apparatchik is to be smart, but not too smart, or better to say not stupid, which would be to be hopeful about the future or about much of anything.

The thing is, this man is loyal to the regime. His poking fun really is from a place very much within the structure of things—like if I were to crack a joke about clergy, a group of which there are, no doubt, many and well-deserved jokes.

But, of course, mail isn’t private. Really, *nothing* is private. There’s no such thing as private in a dictatorship. Every thought you have belongs to the regime. So, this joke gets read by the regime, which takes it to be an act of subversion, which act so perceived then upends this man’s life. Forced to work in the mines with other so-called subversives, he’s treated as an enemy, which he resists being until slowly he accepts himself as indeed an enemy—all from a joke, and not a very good one. But that’s typical of authoritarian regimes, of dictatorships. Humor is dangerous,

laughter felt as subversive, which I suppose it is. Sometimes to poke fun is to get to the truth about things, and dictatorships don't like the truth.

It's strange then that humorlessness should be found in the life of faith—faith which is freedom, faith which is truth. One of the few times I ever offended someone with my preaching was when I supposed the story in the Bible I was preaching on might be a comedy. I'm not alone in having supposed that, for what it's worth. Scores of articles by Bible scholars have asserted the same thing about this particular story. But the offense taken was because the Bible was no place for being funny.

It's in this tradition, I'd guess, that Sarah assumes she's done something wrong, an assumption she expressed in her attempt to cover it up. "I didn't laugh," she said, for she was afraid. "Oh, yes, you did laugh," comes the unpunishing correction. So maybe it's not so offensive a thing—to laugh at God's promises which (let's be honest) seem absurd. No, maybe it's not so irreligious a thing—this momentary loss of control that true laughter is, this bursting in of breath from somewhere beyond yourself. I mean, isn't the spirit of God called *Ruah*, which is to say breath? So maybe laughter, true laughter, is akin to being overcome by the Holy Spirit.

Cracking up, that idiom for losing yourself to laughter, comes to us from when face makeup was so heavy it was even called cake, and it required the wearer to keep a straight face, no visible emotion. But sometimes something happens, and laughter just comes, and your face cracks up, the makeup actually cracking, which—why even have bothered with the effort of putting on a good face, when stuff like this happens and you can't help but to laugh and then your true face comes cracking out...?

Sarah, of course, lived long before cake makeup was a thing. But she lived with that same assumption, it seems, that there are certain emotional experiences and expressions that are *not okay*, especially when it comes to God.

Not that she'd have known these threesome were somehow also the Lord. The story tells us this was the case, that "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." So, these three were the LORD, we the listeners know. But there's no sign that Sarah sensed this was the case.

We're way back near the beginning with Sarah, with Abraham. They emerged together from Ur, that ancient city, to venture forth to new lands. Having done so they discovered, as we say in Godly Play, that God was neither here nor there but that all of God was everywhere.

What's more, this God would promise that these two would become the parents of a great nation, that their offspring would number more than grains of sand in the desert or stars in the night sky.

This promise would be renewed and renewed, stated and stated again. But these two were growing old, and, now settled by the oaks of Mamre, they'd put up their tent and would never take it down again. They were old beyond any capacity to have children. But this had been the heart of the promise: they would have children, or at least one child, and that generation would produce another generation, and on it would go.

These three. These three who arrived out of the heat of the day: they were a weird plurality of being that was equal to this oneness of being: the Lord. And they received of Abraham's hospitality, which redounded to Sarah's labor, a bedrock value that we've all but lost today. Time was, travelers could dare to venture out because they trusted they'd be met on their way by hosts who would have them in, who would give them water and food and a place to rest. In exchange, these hosts would receive word of the world, stories about what happens in other places, in other lives and ways of living—which television delivers to the likes of us today, and now the internet, of course. We don't need strangers to arrive to break up the boredom. We've got reality tv. But for most of human history, a visitor arriving was an opening up of a whole new world.

This was all the more the case when it came to these three, who were also one: a whole new world, a whole new set of possibilities, which were really, clearly *impossibilities*, right?

The promise came again, and this time was even more specific, one of the three saying, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." Which is laughable. Laughable because at this point it was impossible. Laughable also because the image it evokes is precious and strange. To hold a baby, even to imagine holding a baby, and just a regular baby, not even a miracle, most unexpected baby: the strange power of something so helpless and soft and mysterious and *real*, the source of utter pleasure, the source of frustration and even a measure of fear—for how caught up in the baby's wellbeing you have now become, whether their mother or their father or just an accommodating pair of arms. They are aliens, babies are; and they are us, as each of us was once a baby, an embarrassing fact that I'm convinced is at the heart of that phase we all go through in early adolescence: embarrassed by our parents because they're proof that we are not of our own making but are people who once were babies, which is to say once, if long ago, utterly helpless and utterly dependent and utterly, wordlessly compelling.

This is how life continues, pushes through to the next impossible, irrepressible generation? Through the likes of this, through the likes of us? The whole thing is laughable.

Well, I am an advocate of laughter. I love how it is itself an alien experience, a rushing in of a clap of breath that takes over your body for a moment there. Like a revelation. Like the Holy Spirit, that enthusiasm that comes from on high. I love also how it can crack veneers of ideology and aesthetic, or assertions of power that aren't true. I think of Charlie Chaplin in his movie mocking Adolph Hitler, "The Great Dictator," of which Chaplin later said he'd have given anything to know what Hitler thought of the film. I think of Donald Trump whom I can't imagine laughing at much of anything, least of all at himself. And I wonder at Sarah's long ago attempt to hide her own laughter. Why did she do that? Why did she assume her laughter wouldn't be allowed?

You know, when I first started out as a preacher, I realized I needed this faith, which I had been born into, to be something that, now having staked my livelihood on it, could plumb the depths of human experience. If there was something too terrible for the gospel to overcome, if there was something in history that redemption couldn't reach or something in the lives of people I served that proved beyond the reach of God's saving grace, then I couldn't be a part of it. I couldn't tolerate it if it turned out I was just every Sunday simply spooning out some chicken soup for the soul.

But the same became true over time for me when it came to laughter, when it comes to poking fun. If this faith can't withstand some fun, if it must be all so very serious, then how is it not simply one more dictatorship, how is God not simply one more dictator? No, if it can't withstand laughter, then it can't withstand much, then it isn't the truth. You can laugh at the truth. The truth can withstand it—and if it can't, then it isn't the truth.

"I did not laugh," Sarah said, worried—as if the coverup isn't always worse than the crime.

"Yes, you did," said the Lord, maybe laughing now too. ("Won't she be delighted?")

More than delighted, Sarah was also brought to some wisdom, going so far to name her baby Isaac, which means laughter, as if she understood laughter as the seed of it all, or the fruit, or both. Call it transgressive, what she did, I guess; but only if what we imagine it transgressing was but the hard stops of the world so to make a way for the possible of God, powerful, surprising, yes, transgressive.

The other day I was thinking what I'd like for the boys as their lives turn more and more to take on the world.

I do this every once in a while. I become gripped with anxiety that maybe I've missed something. As they are less and less under my control (to the degree that they ever were, which wasn't much), I realize I might have missed the opportunity to press upon them something essential. I didn't teach them cursive handwriting. I didn't force them to do sports. I didn't pressure them to tend to their grades in school; and, though we bought them a study-book to prepare for the SAT, we never made them use it and I'm confident they never did. They don't know how to play the piano because I gave up on them learning it after five years of trying to make them. They never did the school's Quiz Team, this year's of which recently won the statewide competition.

Ugh.

To talk myself out of the panic of all we Goodmans have collectively failed to do, I reflect on what I imagine is actually necessary for life in the coming decades, where climate change and Chat-GPT are just two of the major game-changers, and I figure the essentials are hope, a sense of self, and a sense of humor, which, in my experience, is tied closely in with a sense of God, bemused perhaps by the self-seriousness of the world, and an imaginative push into what seems impossible but maybe isn't.

It's worth noting, I suppose, that Jesus didn't include a sense of humor on the list of things the apostles would need. As he sent them out, these first-called disciples, now sent out as apostles, they received from him a daunting list of what they were to do, and what they could expect. They should heal the sick and cleanse the unholy or destructive. They should proclaim the good news that the reign of heaven is at hand, pressing in on our brittle-faced shows of force with the hope of joy. And for all this, they should expect rejection, persecution, because people will almost always choose the familiar over the good. This is our tragic flaw: we choose the familiar over the good. So, they will be punished. They will be cast out. They will be separated from loved ones who'd really prefer practical expediency to world-disrupting hope. People will hate them.

But they should go, and they should bring but the barest necessities, for they should deliberately position themselves as needing hospitality, needing whatever would be on offer wherever they were going.

Which isn't as easy as it might seem. Really, it's easy to think the challenge of hospitality rests on the one who offers it. You have to be welcoming. You have to be ready with cakes of flour and a fatted calf or whatever is the equivalent in your way of life. You have to be tolerant of strange people and their strange ways in your home. But just as challenging is having to *receive* of

hospitality, eating what is put on the table whether it's what you'd choose or not, entering into whatever place or room is offered, positioning yourself not in the place of power with recourse to offer but in a place of powerlessness with only your need. Receiving of hospitality involves humility, and who among us finds that easy?

But so, they should go.

Did they bring with them a sense of humor? It's a departure from the text to imagine they did. On the other hand, the stories the Bible tells are never exhaustive. No, they're bare. They leave a lot of room for filling in.

Laughter is elemental to the human experience. It might even be elemental to the experience of other creatures. I've seen videos of elephants that seem to be laughing. Research suggests primates laugh. A story on NPR from a couple years ago tells us that about 65 species of animals have been found to laugh. To lighten a tense moment, or to clarify whether something is aggression or play, or to express pleasure at touch, even being tickled, laughter is pro-social: it makes relating easier, it makes relationships more resilient.

You know, maybe Jesus not stating that the apostles would need a sense of humor shouldn't suggest that such a thing would be inappropriate to take along. Maybe it suggests that that such a thing would be unavoidable: of course, the apostles would laugh together as they made their way! Of course, wit and good cheer and poking fun would be a part of this as they announced and enacted the kingdom of heaven in their midst. The world says, "No," God says, "Not so fast," and a clap of laughter brings new possibility. Of course, for these were each sons of laughter, with Isaac as their long-ago relation, Isaac which means laughter.

Which we are as well—sons and daughters of laughter.

I hope today you have occasion to laugh. I hope a moment presents itself where you could crack a joke. Rise to that moment. Take that risk. You might get a laugh. There's almost nothing better.

Thanks be to God.