

**Sermon preached by Reverend Helen Franssell at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 6, 2014**

**HE WHO LAUGHS LAST**

**Genesis 18:1-15**

Of the Bible Births, the four most unlikely births are told with some significant detail: Samuel, born to Hannah, I Samuel 1; John the Baptist, born to Elizabeth and Zechariah; and of course, Jesus, born to Mary, a virgin. And then we have Isaac. Of these four accounts, our story of Isaac's birth is unique in that it doesn't quite portray the same sense of awe and wonder of the others; this particular prophecy is given with 'laughter'; with joy – almost fun. It is, in fact, a foretelling of the mystery of the coming incarnation of God Himself, when Jesus was born.

Now, the number of times the word or a form of the word "laughter" is used in the entire narrative of Isaac is about 16! [18:12; 19:14; 21:6; 21:9b; 26:7; 26:8b] In fact, the very first mention of laughter in the Bible comes in Chapter 17, where we have God first appearing to Abraham, and God delivered the promise of a child by Sarah; it says that "Abraham fell facedown; he also laughed, and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'" The Lord instructed Abraham that he is to name this child Isaac, which means, as you see in the footnote of most Bibles, "he laughs." The accounts of Isaac himself have a humorous spin on them if you read them right – read Genesis 21 and further. We have quite a theme of humor/laughter that is being developed.

So what is it about all this laughter? There are several kinds of laughter, aren't there – for instance, you can laugh with someone at a joke or something that's just plain funny, or you can laugh at someone with ridicule. So, what kind of laughter do we read here? Apparently Abraham and Sarah had very different internal reactions to God's plan. Romans 4 refers to Abraham's this way: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed . . . he did not waver . . . being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised." Sarah's reaction however, draws God's disapproval. He confronts her about her reaction as a lack of faith. They both laughed, but the laughter of Abraham was of amazement, delight, and joy. Sarah's laughter, on the other hand, was of doubt . . . hopelessness maybe – "Me – a mother? Ridiculous!" Note though, that Hebrews 11 commends both him AND Sarah for their faith.

There are differing interpretations . . . and it doesn't help that the word for "laugh" in the Hebrew is the same word when it's used for "joy" and for "derision," or mocking. Does

the Bible even have humor? Can it be that the Bible is funny? Are we allowed to be amused? To laugh? Think about some of this Bible humor –

- like the irony of how a young shepherd boy brazenly steps up past a fully-equipped army to slay a giant with a slingshot and a rock. (I Sam 17)
- The prophet Isaiah gets sarcastic when he calls attention to the fact that the same hunk of wood that a man burns to keep warm and to cook dinner, he fashions into an idol and falls down before it in worship – that’ll bring the point home! (Is 44)
- Listen to the way Isaiah judges the women of Judah for their pride, drawing up an exact list of their jewelry: “bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, earrings and bracelets and veils, headdresses and anklets and sashes, perfume bottles and charms, signet rings and nose rings, fine robes and capes and cloaks, purses and mirrors, linen garments and tiaras and shawls.” (Is 3:18-23)  
Hyperbole.
- And from Proverbs: the man who is so lazy that he can’t lift his hand to his mouth to eat (19:24), or the analogy of the sloth rolling over in bed like a door on its hinges (26:14).
- The writings of Paul, of course, are loaded with wit: “Dead to sin, alive to Christ” – irony that will certainly get your attention!
- Jesus follows the rabbinical tradition of sarcasm and irony in His parables – did you hear the one about the widow who gets what she wants from the judge by pestering him till he can’t take it anymore?
- The people didn’t even get Jesus’ analogy of destroying the temple – His body - and raising it in 3 days. And the idea of being “born again” – enter into your mother’s womb again?

So – yes, there is humor in the Bible. We don’t want to be flippant about God’s Word; we always come in reverence, but I guess God can be pretty funny. When it comes to Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, the laughter here is actually kind of puzzling, but there are two things that all this laughter creates for us in our relationship with God: intimacy and hope. Let’s look first at how the laughter creates **intimacy** – the joining of our hearts with God’s heart.

Notice that as the scene progresses Sarah is drawn closer and deeper into the promise God has come to deliver: first God sees inside the tent where Sarah had recused herself. Not that she would be anywhere else; she was where she belonged. It was culturally appropriate that Sarah not be present as the men are visiting. It would have been immodest for a woman to sit and eat meat with men, and certainly not with strangers. By naming her, the visitors intimated to Abraham that though they seemed like strangers, they actually knew him and his family. By speaking of her, they acknowledged that they knew she was listening – she becomes “the elephant in the room.” By speaking to her,

they acknowledge a relationship with her. By addressing her directly, they reveal an intimate knowledge of her – but that was too much for her, and out of fear she denies the allegation of her laughter with a muffled voice from her hiding place, and the conversation almost becomes an argument: “yes you did!”/”no I didn’t!” It’s kind of funny, if you can picture it. Reminds me of the time that our cat, who knew he wasn’t allowed in the house, managed to slip in and “hide” himself by sticking his head under the couch, leaving all the rest of his fluffy self sticking out. It’s a very comical scene, really!

She’s laughing to herself, and thinking to herself – yet the Lord knew her mind, AND her heart! There is no place we can go where God does not see us! Scripture is loaded with affirmations of God’s intimacy with us: John 10 says “the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name . . . they follow him because they know his voice.” We are the sheep who come to Him because we know His voice. This is the kind of intimacy we’re talking about in John 15 where Jesus calls us friends – no longer strangers, but friends to whom He has revealed everything that He knows from God the Father; or when we sit together at this table before you today. No barriers, no boundaries, no embarrassment, no secrets, no lies. Recall Ps 139: “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.” Nothing is hidden from God – in the same way that He knew Sarah’s doubt and the plans He had for her in the establishment of a people, He knows what will come into our day before we even wake up in the morning; He knows the day of birth, and the day of our death. I don’t know . . . I don’t know if I want anyone to be that close to me. It feels like a risky proposition; it’s living dangerously in a sense. And this was risky for Sarah – she tried to lie about the doubt that God found in her heart. But intimacy with God is based on the purest forgiveness and love.

Our relationships with other human beings can give a sense of what this intimacy is like – our closest friends, our spouses, a sibling, perhaps. These relationships are so challenged by sin and distrust and brokenness and disappointment and change that we too have a tendency to hide and deny what’s really there sometimes. It’s hard to compare those relationships to a relationship with God Almighty, but think of the shared smile across the room, or a reference that no one else except that loved one will really get . . . that kind of humor only exists between people who really know and trust each other; humor naturally arises from these relationships. Sometimes humor can soften barriers between us, so that intimacy begins to be possible. Of course, we have to be careful with humor, because it can also alienate us if it’s the wrong kind at the wrong time.

The point is – God is a PERSON who relates to His people PERSONALLY with PERSONALITY. Though these elements of Abraham’s and Sarah’s stories can – and should be – interpreted on a very serious level, humor cannot be isolated from real life; it is “a dimension of the human experience that can occur anywhere, at any time.” It’s like that wink across the room from someone who knows.

How do you experience intimacy with Jesus? Is the warmth of humor ever a part of it? Have you ever experienced God’s activity in your life in a humorous, intimate way? Do you want to hear a few hospice stories? Yes, hospice does have its funny moments – there is such a thing as hospice humor. I don’t know if you’ll think so . . .

- There’s the time in our inpatient center where a patient with dementia was asking to be baptized. I agonized about this, because I knew her faith affiliation and figured she probably had already been baptized, and being a good Presbyterian I won’t just go around splashing baptismal water. Plus, with her dementia, she would probably forget that I’d baptized her, and I’d be doing it every 10 minutes! Well, I decided to go ahead and do it, knowing that it would bring her comfort. She said she wanted to wear this white gown for the occasion, so while they were helping her put it on, I went and got my stuff. When I returned, she no longer wanted to be baptized . . . turned out that what she really needed was the comforting familiarity of her white nightgown, not baptism – baptism was either the symbol of comfort to her, or the means to the actual comfort she sought – the nightgown! I never did figure out which, and it didn’t matter anyway; she got what she needed most. The joke was on me.
- A couple of weeks ago, I called a patient who has difficulty with stairs to let her know I was just about at her house for the visit we scheduled, to give her advance notice so she could unlock the door. I accidentally called the wrong number however, and got a different patient on the phone. THIS lady said she wasn’t able to visit at that time, but she needed some help processing a very significant issue that was surfacing which was very important for me to know, so we talked for a bit. Out of my stupidity/inattention God inserted HIS will, and HIS purpose for that phone call. (As soon as I heard the voice I figured out the mistake I had made, so that she wasn’t aware of my error; one thing that saved me is that the two have very similar sounding names – Deb and Peg, so the lady I called couldn’t even tell I called her accidentally and used the wrong name!)
- Or the times that I arrive at a home only to find no one home. All irritated about the “waste of my precious time,” I manage to fill the slot with another patient – the one that the Lord planned for me to see all along.

For me, coincidence is a hugely funny and hugely connecting thing in my relationship with God. You know of course, that there’s no such thing as coincidence, but it’s one of the greatest kinds of godly humor to me. I laugh – maybe not right at the time - because I feel

that The Lord is winking at me, reminding me that HE KNOWS, and He is holding me. This laughter fills me with a very comforting sense of God's nearness and love - intimacy.

Now let's consider how all this laughter supports **hope**. It was a sentence of death – Abraham and Sarah both old, “as good as dead” – as it says in Hebrews 11, the “faith chapter” – from a child-bearing point of view. But is anything too hard for Him? Let's not respond as Sarah did at first – blowing it off as ridiculous and then lying about it to protect herself. She was following the dictates of her natural reason rather than the Word of God. It was important for her to come to belief apart from reason and experience. In order for her to understand that it was God Who was with them, it was necessary for Him to expose her unbelief that she might then believe.

When the crazy hope is fulfilled and Isaac is born, Gen. 21, Sarah is filled with joy – “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age” She rejoices as Mary does: “My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.” SEE? Bookends of the salvation lineage – a promised child born to an old lady, a child of even GREATER promise born to a virgin! Like water from a rock. Like a stream in the desert. God makes a promise that points to an even GREATER promise, and the fulfillment of the one only increases the anticipation of the fulfillment of the other! Doesn't this encourage our joy in His work and service? Let us also be filled with wonder, and hope! God's favor to His covenant people surpasses all thoughts and expectations. Who could imagine that God should do so much for those who deserve so little – rather, who deserve nothing but judgment. And it adds to the comfort – it nourishes the hope – when friends join the joy. In Luke 1 Elizabeth's “neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy” – that others might be encouraged to trust in Him. That's what we're about here, worshipping together week after week.

The ultimate irony, the greatest laugh, is that God has made SOMETHING out of NOTHING – the POWER of God, even in the LIMITS of faith. The birth of Isaac is a PREPARATION – the first laugh – for the coming birth of Jesus, so that He could make a people who were NOT His people, HIS people. Because He brought the dead to life, He made sinners His BRIDE, His treasure. And there's more to come!

The intimacy and hope of humor proclaim that the reality of this life doesn't have the final word; GOD does! Humor encourages us to look beyond the current situation and believe in promises that are in constant danger of being starved without hope. It is part of the richness and complexity of life – we're dealing with a God who holds all things in

His hands, after all. Humor is another layer of meaning that gives a greater understanding of ourselves in relation to God's promises, and it creates a beautiful intimacy. Your relationship with your closest friend or your spouse is incomplete if you cannot laugh together – often about things that no one else would even understand! There **SHOULD** be joy and laughter in our reading of His holy Word!

We laugh with all the laughter of Abraham and Sarah, because it is connected to the ultimate fulfillment of fantastic promises – promises that are yet to be completely fulfilled. Intimacy and hope are embodied in laughter. In the laughter of Isaac we find the strength to believe, even when trust in God's promises seems absurd.

So friends, this is your invitation to laugh, because laughter is an expression of our intimacy with our Savior. And laughter enables hope! Don't laugh like Sarah first did, but laugh as Abraham did, and Hannah did, and Elizabeth did, and Mary did. GOD had the last laugh, because Isaac was born! And JESUS was born! Abraham and Sarah were "as good as dead," but Jesus WAS dead! Satan did not have the last laugh – God did! We must find joy in our FAITH today! So laugh, and find intimacy with God, and laugh some more in the hope in His promises! The best is yet to come – "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him." [I Cor. 2:9]