

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Christ Church 2023
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Have you ever laughed at God?

Some of us have been angry with God. We have been grateful to God, scared of him or perhaps doubted him. But have you ever laughed at God? Does laughing and humor have a spiritual value?

Do you know many religious leaders with a good sense of humor? I can think of two: **Bishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama**. These spiritual giants had a great sense of humor. Bishop Tutu's laughter was contagious.

Coincidentally these two spiritual giants emerged from a great deal of oppression and discrimination. Could it be possible that they survived pain and suffering because of their laughter and a great sense of humor? Did they endure pain and suffering simply by laughing at God! Perhaps laughing was the only response to hold them through suffering.

Growing up, I rarely saw clergy laugh or have fun. If a clergy is invited to your house, things were serious. It was as if priests were not supposed to have fun. God forbid, priests could not be seen dancing. The real party begins when priests leave the party.

Perhaps we think that there is something demeaning about laughter. We cannot be taken seriously if we come across as silly. The Puritans apparently felt that way. Laughing was unholy.

Well, the story we just read from Genesis, *involved* laughing at God. Sarah laughed at God just as her husband Abraham had done. Sarah had endured the worst humiliation that an ancient woman could endure - she was childless. Her biological clock had wound down. Giving birth to a child was impossible.

Sarah encouraged Abraham to have a child with their maid, Hagar. She was convinced beyond doubt that having her own child was absurd. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.

But one day, when Ishmael was thirteen, God said to Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son together. Abraham did not just chuckle at that. Scripture says that "Abraham FELL ON HIS FACE and laughed..."The thought of having a child with Sarah was absurd. Yes, he fell on his face and laughed.

A little later, three visitors dropped by his tent. The visitors told Abraham the same message again. They said that he and Sarah would have a child together. Sarah, who was in the tent, overheard the visitors talking about the promise of a son. She had the same reaction as her husband, **she laughed too**.

The rest of the story we know. Sarah did indeed have a son. They named him Isaac, which in Hebrew means...**he laughed**. Sarah and Abraham laughed and named their son “he laughed”

Sarah and Abraham were laughing **not to be funny**. They laughed to hold back the tears. Laughter was the only response to their pain.

Humans use laughter to express what cannot be said in any other way. We may laugh when something is funny. But we also laugh when we find ourselves in “**absurd**” situations.

When our lives feel utterly hopeless, meaningless, and senseless, laughter seems the only possible response.

Yesterday I saw a news clip about a comedian from Ukraine. She said that the appropriate response from senseless suffering was to laugh. For her, comedy was an effective weapon of war.

She said that Russia wants to break Ukrainian spirit and create hopelessness. Laughter is a defiant response to evil. Laughter not because the Ukrainians are in denial. Laughter because when we are at our wits end, God takes over. **According to her laughter is liberating**. The book of proverbs says: *"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."* This Ukrainian comedian was determined never to have crushed spirits.

When things get too awful, to the point of absurdity, you just need to laugh. Laughter is our deep outburst of defiance against the forces of evil. It is the ultimate defiance to hopelessness and death. Laughter is God’s gift to the human spirit.

In the season of Pentecost, God sends us. We are sent to impossible missions. If we are serious about being sent in this polarized and dangerous world, we can’t help but laugh. Laugh not because it is funny to be sent out, we laugh because we recognize the gravity of what we are asked to do. We recognize that on our own this is mission impossible.

I wonder how the disciples reacted when they were sent. The gospel this morning says that Jesus sent them to “**Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons**”. This is big stuff! This is heavy lifting. He told them to take no provisions for their journey. No spare clothing, no food, no water **no cellphone!** What, no cellphone.

I can imagine different reactions coming from the disciples: Fear, doubt, anger, excitement. But I can also imagine many of them **laughing from within**: This is mission impossible. This is absurd.

Sarah's laughter was the recognition of God's miracle. An acknowledgement of God's power to defy the rules of nature. So, brothers and sister, go ahead and laugh. Laugh away as you are being sent to the mission impossible. Laugh away as you live out your faith. Laugh away because our faith and mission are absurd.

In the scriptures, we see signs of God's divine absurdity everywhere! We see absurdity in Sarah's pregnancy. We see absurdity of the cross. We see the absurdity of the sermon on the mount. Love your enemies! Who does that.

But the most absurd action of God in history is the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb. God invites us to laugh at the divine absurdity of Jesus' resurrection. The absurd realization that we too will experience resurrection.

Yes, we laugh at the possibility of God's Kingdom on earth. It feels absurd to believe that the world we live in can come together in love and peace. Can you imagine a day when all creation is at peace. A world not at war, nobody dying of hunger and diseases? Can you imagine a society that respects the dignity of every individual? It feels impossible and absurd but with God this is possible.

So, laugh people of God! because God is here even in the midst of your turmoil and fear. God is in the midst of your worry and pain. Laugh and hold back your tears. As Paul says in this morning's lesson, we laugh because we hope, **and hope does not disappoint us.**

Let me end by acknowledging that it is tough to laugh when you have been looking for a job for months and cannot find one. It is tough to laugh when your body is in pain. It is tough to come up with a smile at the grave of your child. It is tough to smile with all the bad news all around us.

But Sarah's laughter reminds us that we laugh because in hopelessness, and despair, God is hard at work. Like bishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama, there is nothing hopeless for those who believe.

Indeed, laughter is a defiant response to evil and suffering. When we open our eyes to God's work in the world and see miracle after miracle after miracle, even in the midst of all that is wrong, laughter can begin again.

Yes, it is a tough world out there, it is certainly tough to find a reason to laugh. Yet, let us join Sarah and Abraham in their laughter trusting in the absurdity of God's action and promises.