

# Sermon for Sunday, June 18, 2023

Third Sunday after Pentecost

“Life-giving Laughter”

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**What do you call an angry carrot?**

A steamed veggie.

**Where do polar bears keep their money?**

In a snowbank.

**How do you make an egg roll?**

You push it!

Consider these cheesy “dad jokes” a shoutout to anyone who tells them and to all of you who *get* to endure, I mean enjoy them.

We need laughter. It is an essential gift from God. Sarah’s story reveals this. When she overhears divine messengers promise that she will have a son, Sarah can’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. This is a ridiculous promise. She is well past childbearing age. Abraham is old. Besides, Sarah has been living with some version of this promise for almost twenty-five years now. And it has totally upended her life multiple times.

When God first came to her husband Abraham and said, “Go, I will give you children and land and you will be a blessing”, Sarah left everything behind, all her family, everything she’d ever known. Soon famine hit and they had to detour to Egypt. Sarah was forced into Pharaoh’s harem of wives, thanks to Abraham passing her off as his sister. Then Sarah decided that a woman they’d enslaved, Hagar, would provide the child for Abraham. She regretted that decision almost immediately and behaved very badly.

The long unfulfilled promise of a son has led to great suffering. So, when Sarah hears it renewed, she laughs. She laughs at how ridiculous, how absurd, how silly it all is. Sarah’s laughter reminds me a bit of what we often call gallows humor - *grim and ironic humor in a desperate or hopeless situation*. I remember a Zoom call with other pastors during the Omicron surge. We were weary as we talked about recording worship in still empty sanctuaries, outdoor worship in the bitter cold, updating COVID policies yet again. Then one person held up an individual serving of communion. Well, she said grimly, at least we have “Jesus Lunchables.” The laughter that erupted was a release of tension and a defense against despair.

Sarah needs that kind of laughter. When hope hurts, when you wake with longing that is unmet, laughter is essential. When Sarah overhears the divine messengers, she laughs to herself, a little too loudly as it turns out. God hears her and asks, why did Sarah laugh? She tries to deny it, and while God does insist on the truth, “Oh yes, you did laugh,” God also doesn’t condemn Sarah. I imagine God saying, “Oh yes, you did laugh”, with a smile, with a twinkle in God’s eye. I imagine that God knows Sarah needs to laugh.

I believe God knows we need to laugh. We need the release, the bonding, the defiance, the endorphins that come from laughter. And we need so many different kinds of laughter: giggles, chortles, belly laughs, guffaws, laughter that makes you snort, gallows humor, sarcasm, even dad jokes. We need to laugh with each other. We need to laugh at ourselves, not take ourselves too seriously. We *don't* need the jeers and sneers involved with laughing at other people. But most laughter is holy and healing.

And, as Luther Seminary Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker puts it, God creates the best comedy there is, comedy in the classical sense. “Which is to say God doesn’t create stand-up routines or canned laugh tracks, but comedy as something so extraordinarily good that it’s hard to believe, something so out-of-the-ordinary that we laugh until the tears stream down.”<sup>1</sup> God creates what Fredrick Buechner describes as the high comedy of Christ, the high comedy of resurrection. High comedy which ultimately brings “glad tears, at last, not sad tears, tears at the hilarious unexpectedness of things rather than at their tragic expectedness.”<sup>2</sup>

Much of our lives is governed by the tragic expectedness of things. Lives are upended. We regret our decisions and behave badly. We get sick. Our loved ones die. Racism persists. This is the way of our broken world - tragic expectedness. Laughter helps us connect to a deeper reality, that God is at work disrupting the ways of the world. When Sarah’s child is finally born, she declares, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

God does absurd, unexpected, ridiculous things to subvert tragic expectedness. Babies are born to 100-year-old parents, a shepherd boy defeats a giant bully, Jesus raises the dead and is raised from the dead. Yet still, it can be hard for us to laugh, to rejoice in these events when we pray for miracles that don’t come to pass: When the long-awaited baby isn’t born, when prayers for healing seem to go unanswered, when we must carry grief for our children to our graves.

Author Debie Thomas writes that God’s miracles are not an end to themselves but rather, a glimpse into the heart of God. “What kind of God multiplies loaves and fishes for the poorest of the poor?” she asks. “What matters most to a God who stops in his tracks to heal a woman ravaged by a hemorrhage? What kind of joyous, celebratory laughter resides in a God who makes the wine flow at a wedding? What kind of tender heart beats in the chest of a God who raises a dead son and restores him to his widowed mother?”

Thomas also reflects that God’s miracles ask something of all of us. “Since [we’re] called [as Christians] to walk in the footsteps of this loving, liberating, healing, resurrecting God, then how should [we] live? If Jesus’ miracles are about rupture and resistance, if they are subversive acts of defiance against the world’s sin, suffering, and brokenness, then what will [our] resistance look like? How will [faith in a God who works such miracles] translate into Christlike action?”<sup>3</sup>

Laughter can fuel Christlike action. Laughing along with others allows us to practice empathy and accompany each other as we wait and pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth. Laughter builds communities of hope and faith. Laughter helps us experience and share resurrection, God’s disruptions, God’s new life.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11/commentary-on-genesis-181-15-211-7-6>

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (Harper & Row, 1977), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/believing-in-miracles>

Scriptures call us to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. It is also important to laugh. So, thank you, dad jokes. Thank you, God, for you fill our mouths with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.