

Myers Park Presbyterian Church

September 28, 2014

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Laugh

Genesis 17:15-17, 18:11-15

During 2014, the other clergy and I are preaching on 52 words from the Bible, a word a week. These are foundational words for our journey of discipleship.

I need to lay down a disclaimer here. I chose these words long before I accepted the call to leave Myers Park to become the Director of Consulting Services for Macedonian Ministries. It just so happens that the word for today is *laugh*. I was tempted to change it out for the word *cry*, but I'm going to wait to cry later! Perhaps it is providentially appropriate that the word for this day is *laugh*! It comes from the story of Abraham and Sarah.

¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." ¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

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Christianity is serious business when you're facing brutal terrorism and war, homelessness, poverty, hunger, social injustice, prejudice and discrimination, unemployment, child abuse, domestic violence, Christian persecution in northern Iraq or anything else that is destructive to God-given human life. The word "*laugh*" may seem frivolous and extremely inappropriate in the face of such serious business in the world, but is it?

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Abraham was 75-years-old when God made a covenant to make a “*great nation*” of him. (Genesis 12:2) How do you make a “*great nation*” out of an old man who doesn’t have any children? Sarah would have been 66-years-old when this covenant was made, but here’s the kicker – she wouldn’t conceive a child for 24 more years. This “*great nation*” doesn’t get started until Abraham is 99-years-old and Sarah is 90! They wait 24 years after the promise is made before anything happens! (That should make you feel a little better if you are waiting for God to do something in your life. Hang on!)

From what we glean from Scripture, it appears that God intentionally chooses to intervene in **impossible situations** and at **inconvenient times**. Divine work is not restricted to a clock, a calendar, a process, a deadline, the rules of nature or any other human restriction or rational explanation.

Let’s do the math:

- Does it make any sense that you are sitting in a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, on a huge blue ball spinning at 66,000 mph, hanging in space, surrounded by other planets that apparently have no form of life on them? That is so *laughable!*
- Have you ever seen a baby born? That whole process is bazaar! A human being formed within another human being and birthed into the world. Where’s the rhyme and reason in that? It’s funny!

There is no end to the surprising presence of God in the world, if we were but to have eyes to see it. Sometimes it’s a long wait, sometimes not. Sometimes, honestly, it never happens and we have no answer as to why not. Other times, it happens without us even asking or believing. Sometimes we beg for God’s activity in the world and other times it crashes in upon us unannounced.

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The Bible is full of stories of how unusually God behaves.

Creation

Noah

Abraham and Sarah

Isaac, Jacob

the exodus

the wilderness

the promised land

the return after exile

And then an angel comes to Mary? The Christ is born to a peasant family?

And it keeps moving through healings and miracles, the crucifixion to the resurrection.

All of that says,

- *Don't put God in a box!*
- *Don't rule anything out.*
- *Don't assume that you know the ways of the Lord.*
- *Don't ever give up hope on anything or anybody, anywhere at any time – not even on this world in all of its disarray.*

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How irrational is it to make a covenant with a 75-year-old man and a 66-year-old woman and promise to make a great nation out of them when they are childless? That is *laughable!* And if that's not enough, let's wait 24 more years before the child is ever conceived! What's God doing? What's the purpose in those 24 years of waiting? Why not just do it? But there is often that gap of time between what we know and believe God will do and what God actually does. Those can be times of great anxiety and fear, but they can also be times of great trust and faith. Sometimes it's both.

This is the way it is! There's nothing wrong with you if you're stuck in a holding pattern. You haven't done anything wrong if you have to wait for the Lord. God's not waiting on you to have enough faith before God will actually do something.

There are lots of stories in the Bible in which God takes action before anybody believes or knows anything. God's hands are not tied by the lack of human faith. Our faith is the release of complete trust that we belong to God, that we are loved by God, that God knows where we are and what we need, and that in God's due time God's will becomes known to us. It sure doesn't hurt to have faith, but God is not restricted by our lack of it.

The Bible says this about Abraham,

And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.
(Genesis 15:6)

Abraham chose to trust God. Nobody ever said that would be easy, but nothing right is ever easy.

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And let's not skip over Abraham's humanness. God says to Abraham,

'I will bless (Sarah), and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'
(And then it says) *Abraham fell on his face and **laughed**, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Can Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child?"* (Gen. 17:16-17)

Now add Sarah's response,

So Sarah **laughed** to herself saying, *"After I've grown old, my husband is old, shall I have I have pleasure?"* And the Lord says 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."* (Gen. 18:12-14)

And I find this entertaining,

But Sarah denied **laughing** saying, *"I did not **laugh**;"* for she was afraid. (God) said, *"Oh yes, you did **laugh**."* (Gen. 18:15)

I think Abraham and Sarah had a nervous laugh, don't you? I don't think it was a belly roll. I think they were laughing nervously at God, as if to say, *"You've got to be kidding me! You are kidding, right?"* We are clueless as to how the Divine intermingles among us. We're fortunate if we ever see it or understand it in our lifetime. It's always surprising.

Who is ever sure what God is doing, when, or how? Who knows that? I don't. Anytime I think I do, I'm always stunned to find out that I don't.

In times of high anxiety and fear, Israel would always look back to this story of Abraham and Sarah and remember how God behaves. God is not waiting for us to get it or to understand it. God is not coloring within the lines. God knows no limits or restrictions. I don't need to instruct God as to what to do – I need to wait and see what God does. God is faithful, steadfast and sure.

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So what's going on in your life right now? Is there a place in your story where you may want to *laugh* at God? Is there a place where it's just not possible, not going to happen, outside the bounds of logic and reason, a place where God could be at work in your life?

On a grander scale, what is God doing in our modern world of war and brutality? Where is God in all of that? Where is the divine activity going to show up and how long are we going to have to wait? Do we *laugh* at the thought of *"world peace?"* Could God possibly heal this broken world? If a child can be born to a 90- year-old woman and begin the building of a great nation, perhaps we should stop *laughing* and start believing.

"I did not laugh. (said Sarah) Oh yes, you did laugh. (said the Lord)
(18:15)

Indeed she did. We always do when God is at work in the world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: **Amen**