

Sermon for June 14, 2020

11 Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon texts: Genesis 18: 1-15 and Matthew 9:35-10:8

Sermon title: *Are You Laughing?*

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION: God of miracles and surprises, with you anything is possible. Help us forget what we think we know about you – Let us laugh with Sarah, when new life begins to grow within her old womb; let us stand in awe as fishermen perform your miracles. When we are healed by your grace, let us bow before you. Touch us now Lord with your Holy Spirit that we might be made whole. Amen.**

**PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Wind and cleanse us; come as Holy Light and illumine us; come as Holy Truth and guide us; come as Holy Fire and burn in us; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.**

When runners use the term "in the zone" they are usually describing a state of being when they reach a peak level of performance. I have been in this zone only once and that was when Dave and I were race-walking and I was increasing my speed as we approached our finish line. I felt almost as if I were out of my body; I was gliding smooth as silk above the pavement and was reluctant to stop the abundance of endorphins flooding my brain. When I stopped, I remember bending over, gasping and laughing at the same time.

It's like that, with the God-zone, as well. The laughter, I mean. I've been in that zone one or twice. When I graduated from seminary and was looking for my first call, I was looking for a call to a church that was within commuting distance of home. I was bound by geography. At the time, there were four positions available in the area. I really wanted to be an associate pastor, not a solo pastor, because I thought I had so much to learn. I never took a class in seminary on the Christian year, so I didn't have much of a clue as to what I was supposed to be doing in October, in February, or July.

Places where I was invited to submit my resume closed the door in my face. One church, Tabor in Crozet wanted a solo minister with experience, which I didn't have, but I sent in my PIF anyway. One Wednesday evening around 9pm the chair of the PNC called and without introducing herself said *well you're not exactly what we're looking for, but it looks as if you need some experience with interviews, and so do we, so let's get together.* I thought the interview went well, that is until I ran into the PNC chair at a local restaurant, and she didn't recognize me. I was downhearted. Three months passed. Silence. Then, one Wednesday evening, about nine o'clock the phone rang. *Well, you're still not what we are looking for, but the Holy Spirit doesn't seem to be calling anything else, so let's talk again.* When the second interview ended, and I got into my car, I laughed out loud, because I was in the "God- zone," and knew this was the place that God had prepared for me. However, as a solo pastor, God did throw me into the deep end of the pool.

I think this kind of laughter, this kind of joy, confidence, and pure trust in the blessing and providence of God is what God intends for us, whatever our circumstances. However, even when we have experiences of God's love and blessing, it's hard to hold onto, to remember those moments. It's hard to stay in the God-zone. Even Abraham and Sarah found it difficult.

When Abraham hosted the three men by the oaks of Mamre, he was told that his wife Sarah, who was ninety at the time, was going to have a baby. In an earlier version of God's promise, it is Abraham who falls on his face laughing, but in today's reading, it is Sarah who has a good belly laugh.

Now these are two people who have some experience with God and God's promises. The Lord had appeared to Abram, before he was renamed Abraham, and told him to leave his country and kindred and father's house and go to the land that God would show him. Abram obeyed and became very rich in livestock, silver, and gold. God promised that Abram's offspring would be like the dust of the earth, too numerous to count. This promise, however, didn't seem to be fulfilled.

There was no baby, except Ishmael, the son of Abraham and an Egyptian slave-girl named Hagar. Even though Sarah was past child-bearing, the promise is made again. *Your wife Sarah shall have a son.* Why does God make promises that seem too outrageous to be believed? Sarah, listening at the door of the tent laughs, not out of joy, but probably out of derision. God doesn't seem to mind either Abraham or Sarah's laughter, though, because God tells them that the baby is going to be a boy and that he is to be named Isaac – which in Hebrew means laughter.

Why did these two old people laugh? Because what God promised them was beyond anything they could imagine. Which goes to the point that it is not God's faithfulness, but our lack of imagination that prevents us from trusting fully in God's promises. *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?* Is anything beyond God's power? No.

Imagine, now, that you are one of the disciples who has been following Jesus, listening to his stories and parables, helping him feed the multitudes, standing in awe when he has healed the sick and raised the dead. Matthew tells us that Jesus *had compassion for [the crowds], because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* Jesus knows that his time on earth is coming to an end very soon; he looked around and started to hand off his work to those who have been with him all along. I wonder if those disciples laughed when they heard Jesus' instructions, perhaps said, *Who, me? You must be joking. You expect me to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons?* Maybe their laughter was a little like Abraham's and Sarah's.

The missionary handbook Jesus gives the disciples acknowledges that the journey to proclaim the good news of the kingdom is not an easy one. Sometimes they will not be listened to or welcomed.. They are to go on their journey without gold, or silver, or copper in their belts, no extra sandals or suits. They will be dependent on the hospitality of someone in the village or town that they enter. The household that receives them also receives a blessing: peace.

The angels who come to Abraham are also dependent on hospitality. Abraham would qualify as the worthy household that Jesus describes. Abraham orders water to be brought to wash the men's feet and instructs Sarah to *make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.* To his servant, he gives the tender and good calf to be prepared for Abraham's guests. Abraham and Sarah also receive a blessing: the promise of a child. When Sarah denies that she laughed at the promise made to her, the Lord corrects her: *Oh yes, you did laugh,* not to chastise her, but to provoke her to remember God's promise that will result in her child's name.

The final verse of Mary Oliver's poem *The Summer Day* contains this line: *Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* Maybe Jesus doesn't use those words exactly, but I think that was surely the intent when he called the twelve disciples by name. Are you going to take the power and the promises that I have blessed you with and help the harassed and helpless crowds upon which I have compassion? Are you going to respond to the call to discipleship with vulnerability and self-giving? Are you going to walk this journey proclaiming the good news of the kingdom with gladness, singing, and laughter which is the only genuine response to God's faithfulness? *Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* Amen.