

June 15, 2008  
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Romans 5:1-5  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *A Laughing Matter*

One thing we can all expect is that the unexpected will happen. Some of those unexpected things make us smile. You think you've done terrible on a test at school and much to your delight you did better than you thought. Or you get a call from a long lost friend and it's great to catch up. Or, you wake up on Friday morning, and find out the Celtics won. After watching the first quarter where the Lakers were on fire and the Celtics had a lid on their basket, I sure didn't expect them to win.

But not all unexpected happenings bring a smile. We get medical information that let's us know of a serious condition in our bodies. Or spring rains turn into a flood. Or, the price of oil shifts suddenly and unexpectedly and people are wondering how to provide heat next winter. And we know some of our neighbors will really struggle with this.

It is an ever-changing and ever-adapting world. When Ron and I headed out for California twenty years ago this summer, I hoped we would be there for no more than five years. We stayed sixteen. I've learned that you better be careful where you raise your children, because it will become their home. For our older daughter, Lauren, Phoenix is still home and she has moved back there just this last week. I know many of you also have children who are all over the country and even all over the world.

In some ways life has changed over the millennia and in other ways it hasn't.

Life for Abraham and Sarah was also an ever-changing and ever-adapting world. Even after they are established in the homeland of Haran they sense a call to move to a new land. Abraham also believes in a promise that his descendants will number as great as the stars in the heaven. However, as time goes on there is one serious problem. Sarah is barren. Month after month, year after year, passes and there is no child. Children were essential in their culture. Not only were they an emotional connection but they were your Social security plan, your pension plan, and your eternal life plan all rolled into one. You needed children to take care of you in your old age, and the Hebrew people believed that you experienced "life after death" through your children.

People today who experience infertility problems can empathize with Abraham and Sarah's sense of hope, then despair, as time and again no child is conceived. Today we have many medical forms of help and intervention, although they do not always work. As we listen to this story I am mindful of those who do not have the same final outcome as Abraham and Sarah. In Sarah's day, people had less high tech ways to address infertility problems. First, Abraham is prepared to designate one of his servants, Eliezer of Damascus, as his rightful heir, which he could do. In other words he would adopt an heir. Sarah takes another approach. She gives her Egyptian maid-servant, Hagar, to Abraham that Hagar might bear a child for them. Because Hagar was a servant, Sarah may claim Hagar's

child, Ishamael, as her own. As we can see, surrogate mothering is not new. Although in this case Hagar had no say in the matter.

However, this couple continues to experience a sense of divine promise that they will have a son and they should name him Isaac. The name Isaac is central to this whole story. In fact it lets us know that this is a laughing matter, for the name Isaac means, “he laughs.” You’ve got to be kidding, Abraham must be thinking. I’ve heard this all before and nothing has happened. It isn’t even humanly possible anymore. Sarah is too old. “He laughs” is a good one. In fact it hits Abrahams funny bone hard. The text says that when Abraham hears God say again that there will be a son and his name will be Isaac, Abraham didn’t just chuckle, he didn’t just guffaw, “Abraham fell on his face and laughed.” (17:17)

Then one day, three odd visitors appear at Abraham and Sarah’s tent bearing a box of its-a-boy cigars. How insensitive can you be! What was Sarah to do? She might have burst into tears. Who could blame her? She might have let loose a torrent of anger. Who could blame her? Instead she laughed. Maybe a laugh of irony. Was there a geriatric maternity ward in town? Yet, in this ironic laughter maybe there was also a little bubble of hope. Laughter is one of hope’s deepest resources.

Sarah and Abraham thought they had come to a dead end. They were too old, too barren. Amazingly, it was into this very emptiness that God came. Hilarity is the juxtaposition of two world views, where the expected and the unexpected collide. Abraham and Sarah should have been touring assisted living facilities, not

out selecting a crib and a camel seat. It’s hilarious, it’s a laughing matter – pregnant with hope. God dealt with Sarah as God had promised, and

*It suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they’d ever had hadn’t been half wild enough.*

(Frederick Buechner)

As Sarah says, “*God has brought laughter for me. Everyone who hears of it will laugh with me.*” Through Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, we are people born of laughter.

We know laughing feels good. And scientific research affirms that laughter is good medicine. It mimics mild exercise, so those of us looking for more exercise should laugh more. A little chuckle also gives the immune system a boost by increasing the activity of cells that play a fundamental role in destroying viruses. So you won’t be surprised to hear that a prominent doctor who discovered that cheerful people resist disease better than chronic grumblers... concluded that *the surly bird gets the germ.*

Where did we get the idea that somberness was next to saintliness? One of the church’s saints, Teresa of Avila, put it best, writing, *From ...sour-faced saints, Good Lord, deliver us!*

How many pictures of Jesus laughing have you ever seen? I have a book titled, *The Faces of Jesus*. There isn’t a single picture of Jesus laughing – a few smiles, but not laughter. Yet, I do have one picture of Jesus laughing. Actually it is a photograph of a wood carving of Jesus laughing. The carving resides in a small chapel in northern New Mexico.

I also came across a word picture about Jesus and laughter, written by a woman who had lived through a very dark depression and came out saying “there is healing power in humor.” She wrote this:

*Jesus*

*I believe you laughed*

*As Mary bathed you*

*And Joseph tickled your toes.*

*I believe you giggled*

*As you and other children*

*Played your childhood games.*

*And when you went*

*to the Temple*

*and astounded the teacher,*

*I believe you chuckled*

*As all children chuckle*

*When they stump adults.*

*And surely there were*

*Moment of merriment*

*As you and your disciples*

*Deepened your relationship.*

*And as you and Mary*

*And Martha and Lazarus*

*fellowshipped, mirth must have been mirrored on your faces.*

*Jesus,*

*I know you wept and anguished.*

*But I believe you laughed, too.*

*Create in me the life of laughter.*

(Lois H. Morgan, from *Holy Humor*, by Cal & Rose Samra, pg. 239)

Maybe when Jesus said we had to become like a child to enter the kingdom maybe one of the things he was alluding to was children’s wonderful capacity to giggle, to chuckle, to laugh – to fall off their seats, roll on the floor and just bust a gut.

If hilarity is the juxtaposition of the expected with the unexpected, then resurrection is the most hilarious event of all. Easter is the morning when God laughs out loud, laughs at all the things

that pretend to be all powerful, including cruelty, despair, and evil and shows them for the pretenders that they are. There are ancient traditions of Easter Monday as a day of “Joy and laughter,” where the faithful played practical jokes on one another, sang and danced. It was hilarious.

An Iglulik Eskimo saying puts it this way, *Evil prevails where laughter is not known.* (Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, pg. 40)

The resurrection is a day of laughter. And laughter is a mini resurrection, allowing us to rise again in the moment.

On this Father’s Day, allow me to tell a story about my father. My father was a father who tickled our toes and played our childhood games with us. And when we astounded him with our questions and answers, he chuckled. In retirement, one of the pastimes he included in his repertoire was blowing bubbles. He had little bubble bottles, big bubble trays, and even a bubble machine. My mother came home more than once to see oodles of bubbles floating across their picture window. My dad was out on the porch – blowing away.

One time when I was feeling blue, he suggested I go blow some bubbles. At the time, I confess I was stuck in my blueness and didn’t immediately appreciate his words of wisdom. However, they were wise words that have stuck with me. It is a good thing – maybe especially when you are blue - to take time to blow bubbles.