

Dare To Laugh

Three weeks into our year of laughter. How's it going so far? I know, it hasn't all been giggles and laughs has it? Remember I told you last week our ability to laugh in the face of the future is based on outlook, knowledge and trust. Our outlook is different from the world's because we see beyond this life. We see from a heavenly perspective, an eternal perspective. We see things differently because we know something the world doesn't know and we trust the God who created us and redeemed us. On that basis we can laugh in the face of an uncertain future. We can laugh and rejoice even when things don't turn out as we anticipated or hoped. At the end of the day we can still celebrate and rejoice in the trustworthiness of our God.

Laughter through tears, it's part of the human experience. Sometimes we laugh to keep from crying. Sometimes we laugh because we've already cried all the tears we can cry. We laugh because it all seems so crazy, unbelievable, preposterous. We laugh because of the unexpectedness of it all.

I've mentioned frequently the author Frederick Buechner. I read his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* this past week. Buechner says two elements typically go into making things funny: incongruity and surprise. If something is incongruent, it means it doesn't seem to fit. Two or three things don't seem to go together. We expect one thing and something totally unexpected is produced – something that doesn't seem to fit in the picture – and we laugh. We laugh at the surprise of it – the unexpected. It's the reason we still laugh at America's Funniest Videos, because of the unexpected. (This you tube video made the rounds a couple of years ago. The surprise and the irony make me laugh.)

We laugh at the unexpectedness, the surprise. And that is at the heart of the gospel. The outlandishness, the impossibility and unlikeliness of it all. That God would choose to redeem us. Us, as mixed up and sinful as we were and are, yet he chose us. It's as unexpected as the clowns climbing out of the little car isn't it? God, loving us, choosing us.

Originally the word comedy referred to any literary work with a non-tragic ending. There is no greater "non-tragic" story than the gospel! God, redeeming us. In the purest sense it is a comedy. At the cross snatching victory out of the jaws of death and defeat. The whole story is gloriously outrageous isn't it? A teenaged girl and her fiancée, a trip to an obscure village of Bethlehem. A stable, a manger, a virgin birth attended by shepherds and angels and wisemen. It

is gloriously preposterous (preposterous means inverted - the first last and the last first, contrary to nature, common sense or reason, absurd). It's crazy, absurd, totally unexpected. The world laughs at it still today. A baby in a manger that grows up to be executed on a Roman cross, then rises from the grave as a Savior to take away the sins of the world. The world thinks of it as foolishness.

Remember what the apostle Paul said? **“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:18-14.**

God loves to surprise us with the unexpected. He is a master at catching us off guard and making us laugh. (Five years ago I preached a similar message I called Laughing With Sarah. I decided this story was a good way to begin a year of laughter.)

Let me quote from Buechner's book as we begin. “The place to start is with a woman laughing. She is an old woman, and, after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and rutted like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts to shake. She squinches her eyes shut, and her laughter is all China teeth and wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing ninety-one hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby. Even though it was an angel who told her, she can't control herself, and her husband can't control himself either. He keeps a straight face a few seconds longer than she does, but he ends by cracking up, too. Even the angel is not unaffected. He hides his mouth behind his golden scapular but you can still see his eyes. They are larkspur blue and brimming with something of which the laughter of the old woman and her husband is at best only a rough translation.

“The old woman's name is Sarah, of course, and the old man's name is Abraham and they are laughing at the idea of a baby's being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare's picking up the tab. They are laughing because the angel not only seems to believe it but seems to expect them to believe it too. They are laughing because with part of themselves they do believe it. They are laughing because with another part of themselves they know it would take a fool to believe it. They are laughing because laughing is better than crying and maybe not even all that

different. They are laughing because if by some crazy chance it should just happen to come true, then they would really have something to laugh about. They are laughing at God and with God, and they are laughing at themselves too because laughter has that in common with weeping. No matter what the immediate occasion is of either your laughter or your tears, the object of both ends up being yourself and your own life.” (*Telling The Truth* by Frederick Buechner, p.49-50)

In case you're unfamiliar with the story, let me quickly give you some background. In Genesis 12 God speaks to a man named Abram and tells him he plans to make him and his descendants into a great nation and will bless those who bless him and will curse those who curse him and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through him. He would be the father of the nation of Israel. God tells him to take his family and go to a land which God will show him. Abram takes his wife, Sarai, leaves home and starts on this journey. The bible tells us Sarah was a beautiful woman.

(Picture of young Sarah) Picture by Abel Pann

In Genesis 15 God tells Abram to look up into the sky. He tells him his descendants will be as the stars in the sky, yet Abram and Sarai were childless. Years go by and there is still no heir, so trying to help God fulfill his promise, Abram has a son with Sarai's servant, Hagar, but this was not the son God had promised to give him and only causes trouble at home.

When Abram was about 100 years old, in Genesis 17, the Bible says the Lord appeared to Abram and gave him a new name. His name, Abram, meant “exalted father”. Like a bad joke, God said from now on you will be called Abraham which means “father of many.” It's like calling a tall guy “shorty” to call a childless guy “father of many.” And Sarai will be called Sarah (both names mean princess), but she will not just be a princess, she will be the mother of nations and kings will come from her. And God told Abraham, **“I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her.” Genesis 17:16**

In the face of such a crazy idea, incongruous and unexpected remember, the basis for comedy and laughter, so what does Abraham do? **“Abraham fell face down; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’” Genesis 17:17** Abraham did what anyone would do. The idea of a 100 year old man and his 90 year old wife having a baby does seem laughable. Most of all it just seems impossible. I assume Abraham just kept this information to himself. It seemed so crazy

there was no point in repeating it to Sarah.

Sometime later, in Genesis 18, Abraham is resting in the shade at the entrance to his tent, escaping from the afternoon heat when suddenly he is aware of three men standing nearby. They just seem to have appeared. In typical Eastern and Bedouin hospitality, he bowed and offered them food, water and lodging. It was the custom to provide much more than first offered. The idea was that by offering food, rest and water, you could make a friend of a potential enemy.

(Abraham bowing before the three visitors)

Time didn't seem to be a problem as they rested and waited for a calf to be prepared and bread to be kneaded and baked. (Three seahs of flour was about 20 quarts. Sarah baked a lot of bread and they killed a calf and prepared and barbecued it.) While they ate, the bible says Abraham stood near them under a tree and watched. He must have been wondering who these guys were, where had they come from, and what was their purpose in coming to his tent. Finally, they asked where his wife Sarah was. He told them she was in the tent. The bible says, **“Then the Lord said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.’” Genesis 18:10.**

The bible tells us that Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent. Look at this passage in Genesis 18:11-15. **“Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of child-bearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’” Genesis 18:11-12**

Sarah laughed. Listen to Frederick Buechner again. “Before we ask any questions about it, we should first just listen to it. It starts with a startled catch of the breath because the last thing either of them expected to do was to laugh, and it takes them by surprise as much as it takes us. It wells up in their throats like sorrow, only it is not sorrow, and contorts their old faces like tears, only that's not what it is either, or at least a different kind of tears. Their shoulders shake. Their faces go red. Their China teeth slip a notch. She will be ninety-one on her next birthday, and the angel says she will celebrate it in the maternity ward. Sarah stuffs her apron to her mouth. Abraham gasps for air.”

Unexpected and impossible and unbelievable. The promise that had been hanging over them all of these years, following them as they followed the herds, it was back. It had filled them

with hope when they were young. “You will have a son with Sarah”. They had both heard this before. How many times would she hear that promise and get her hopes up only to have them dashed again, month after month. Enough already! She had heard this story for years. Now she is 90 years old. She had long since given up hope about having a child. It hurt for a long time, to be childless, but finally the pain and anger had mellowed into disappointment and finally to resignation and a bleak cynicism. “We must have misunderstood the promise. Or Ishmael is the son of promise after all. Or I must have sinned and God changed his plans.”

To hear it again, “you will have a son” now that your husband is 100 and you are 90, it perhaps sounded more like a cruel joke, like the visitors were mocking her the way the presence of Hagar and Ishmael had mocked her. So she laughed, but where did the laughter come from? Was Sarah laughing the laugh of the cynic? “Yeah, right. I’m going to have a baby at 91. That’s a laugh.” Or was it the laugh of the hopeful. “Are you serious? Really? Me? Pregnant at 91? Can I dare to believe it?” After all these years, would Sarah really have a baby? Could she really dare to let her hopes rise again?

Sarah is faced with a choice as are we. Believe that God can still bring about the unexpected, can still surprise us with joy, or choose to believe that there are no joyful surprises left. At 90 and 100, Sarah and Abraham have already been there and done that. There is nothing that can surprise them at this age. She was too old to believe in fairy tales. She had seen too much to believe in happy endings. She was too old to keep on believing in a promise that was physically impossible. She had a choice to make. What would she do? Could she believe and laugh with excitement and unbelievable joy, or would she simply laugh the laugh of the cynic. Listen to Buechner again.

“Then the question: where does their laughter come from? It comes from as deep a place as tears come from, and in a way it comes from the same place. As much as tears do, it comes out of the darkness of the world where God is of all missing persons the most missed, except that it comes not as an ally of darkness but as its adversary, not as a symptom of darkness but as its antidote. The laughter of Abraham and Sarah at the angel’s extraordinary announcement does not eliminate the darkness, because through the long, childless years of the past, darkness has already taken its toll, and in the long years that lie ahead there will be darkness for them still as, for instance, when Abraham is asked to take the child of the promise and offer him to God as a

burnt offering. They both still have to face the darkness both of death and of life in a world where God is seen at best only from afar, through a glass darkly, but with their laughter something new breaks into their darkness, something so unexpected and preposterous and glad that they can only laugh at it in astonishment.”

Where is the laughter coming from? Is Sarah laughing a hopeful laugh or is it one born of bitterness? Sarah, can you let the element of surprise back into your life? Can you dare to laugh again and believe again when everything suggests otherwise? Can you dare to fix up the nursery again? The answer is found in Genesis 18:13.

Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.’ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh.’ But he said, ‘Yes, you did laugh.’” Genesis 18:13-15

Don’t miss the angel’s question because it demands an answer from all of us. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” If your answer is “Yes. Some things are just too much, too hard, too complex, too difficult for God to handle” – then everything kind of shuts down, doesn’t it? God is no longer God. There is no place for surprise, or hope, no place for miracles, or laughter.

But if your answer is “No. Absolutely nothing is too hard for the Lord” – then the possibilities are endless aren’t they? Anything can happen. Surprise comes back into your life as a possibility whether you are nine or ninety. Something miraculous could be just around the corner. Hope floods back into your thinking, dreams come alive again. Nothing is too hard for God. This is where the laughter comes from. This is why Sarah can choose to laugh again, even in the face of the darkness.

If some things are too hard for God, then you laugh the laugh of the cynic, the one who can’t or won’t be surprised, the laugh of one who won’t risk hoping again. But if nothing is too hard for God, then you laugh the laughter of the hope-filled. You laugh with Abraham and Sarah– “All right! We’re gonna have a baby!” You laugh and fix up the nursery again.

Maybe it’s been a long, barren season for you, like Abraham and Sarah. Let me challenge you to believe again, to trust again. Dare to laugh with God again. Open your heart to the possibility of laughter, that God still has surprises in store for you. Is anything too hard for God?

Absolutely nothing is too hard for him.

Hebrews 11 tells us the rest of the story. The NIV misses it here in the translation. But King James and NAS translate it correctly. **“By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; therefore, also there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, ‘as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore’.” Hebrews 11:11-12**

Sarah hoped again. Sarah, although she was 90, decided to trust the words of the Lord again. It wasn't too late. It all seemed incongruous, none of it seemed to fit, the timing was all wrong, it should have been years ago. She would be raising a teenager when she was past 100. Where would she find maternity clothes for a 90 year old? But Sarah chose to believe it again. She considered Him faithful who had promised. Nothing about this seemed possible, but if God said it, then she would believe it.

And look at Genesis 21. **“Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him...Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me’. And she added, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’” Genesis 21:1-7**

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter.” What a wonderful phrase. They named their son Isaac which means, “He laughs.” This time Sarah was laughing with God, not at God. This time Sarah was smiling the sweet smile of those surprised by grace, surprised by joy.

I bought this collection of pictures in Israel because of this one picture really. I loved the twinkle in her eyes, the smile, the laughter that breaks across her face. Have you ever wondered what a 90 year old mother to be looks like?

(Sarah old and smiling).

Imagine the scene everywhere Sarah and Abraham went with Isaac. Imagine the baby pictures in the album. One author said Sarah had one foot in the grave and one foot in the maternity ward. We laugh because it is incongruous. We laugh because we are surprised. We laugh because we too believe in and celebrate God's faithfulness. We believe that he will keep

his promises to us as well even if we are 90 or 100 years old. God will still honor his promise.

Consider with me: What if this is the year when God says something to you so outrageous, so beyond, so preposterous that you have to laugh out loud. You laugh because it sounds crazy and then you remember Sarah and the fulfillment of God's promise, so you allow surprise back into your life. You remember the angel's question, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" How will you answer? Will you laugh the cynic's bitter laugh or the laugh of the hopeful?

Maybe he is saying something crazy to you right now - like how He is going to heal you, or save your marriage, or provide a job, or fill you with hope and peace. Dare to believe.

God hasn't run out of surprises. Everything may not be adding up right now in your life. All the pieces may not fit just yet. But trust God. Consider him faithful. Wait for his timing. There is laughter ahead. Dare to laugh with God again.

"God has brought me laughter", Sarah said. Let's believe together that God will bring laughter to us as we consider as Sarah did, the faithfulness of the one who has promised.