

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, June 18, 2017)

Text: **Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7** and **Psalms 100** (*NRSV*)

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?"

And he said, "There, in the tent."

Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said 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." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

... The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into God's presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.
It is God that made us, and we are God's;
we are God's people, and the sheep of
God's pasture.

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving,
and God's courts with praise.
Give thanks to God, bless God's name.

For the Lord is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever,
and God's faithfulness to all generations.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Laugh with Me”**

Once upon a time, a young man came of age and was preparing to go out and make his way in the world. His father and his mother were greatly concerned. Would he make the right choices? What would he become? So they consulted with a learned scholar in these matters, and devised a clever plan. One evening, while their son was preparing to go out, the parents placed a bible, a \$20 bill, and a shot of whiskey on the kitchen table. They concealed themselves behind a curtain and waited. "If he takes the Bible," the learned scholar had told them, "your son will become a preacher." "If he chooses the money, he'll become a banker; if he chooses the whiskey, he'll become a drunk." From behind the curtain the worried parents watched and waited. Finally, their son came into the room and paused for a moment standing over the table. The moment was at hand. Very quickly, their son put the \$20 bill in his pocket, tucked the Bible under his arm, drank down the shot of whiskey in a single gulp, and went out the door. The confused mother and father reported their findings to the learned scholar in these matters. "Oh Lord," he said after a pause, "I'm afraid your son is going to be a politician."

I tell this joke with the slightest pretense of it being about a father. But, really, it was just to get you to laugh. I mean, what else do you expect out of a sermon entitled, “Laugh with Me?”

But these explorations aren't just about laughter. They're about all of the emotions we experience in our relationship with God and the ways in which God delights in them.

On my overcrowded bookshelves downstairs I have one delightfully thin volume called, “I Heard God Laughing.” Perhaps some of you have heard of Hafiz, the most beloved poet of Persians who was born and lived in Shiraz, a beautiful garden city, where he became a famous spiritual teacher during the 14th century. A beloved friend of mine who taught me much about laughter gave it to me while I trod my own early spiritual path back in college days. Irene has since passed on, but her heart and spirit live on in my own and I can never help but smile when I think of the way she would throw back her head and laugh uproariously and contagiously.

The brilliant translator Daniel Ladinsky put together this small volume of poems and I want to share one with you right now called *Tripping over Joy*:

What is the difference
Between your experience of Existence
And that of a saint?
The saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God
And that the Beloved
Has just made such a Fantastic Move
That the saint is now continually
Tripping over Joy
And bursting out in Laughter
And saying, "I Surrender!"
Whereas, my dear,
I am afraid you still think
You have a thousand serious moves.

Growing up in the Mennonite church, we weren't encouraged to laugh too much in the church house, but outside of its doors our homes rang with laughter. I can remember no sweeter music than to sit in a corner of the kitchen while my mother and her sisters washed dishes or prepared a meal with my Grandma and Grandpa close by all telling stories and letting their laughter ring throughout that big old farm house. "The joy of the Lord is my strength," Grandpa would often say and he bred laughter into his family as surely as he raised all of us to delight in God's laws and precepts.

"There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance," it says in Ecclesiastes 3, and today I assert that God would love it if we'd take a little more time to laugh and a little less time to weep as we face the challenges and calamities of our day. No forced or inauthentic laughter mind you, but perhaps developing a way of thinking and being in the world that sees the humor and ridiculousness in a situation and allows ourselves to laugh at it rather than to mire ourselves in a state of worry and dread, contributing to a collective consciousness that sees life as dreary and horrid and fearful rather than full of God's grace, joy and laughter.

It's funny (get it) that in our account today from Genesis that Carol read so beautifully for us, God appears to chastise Sarah for her laughter, but let's look at that passage again and see what might really be going on here.

First, we need a little context for the story, which Kathryn Schifferdecker, an Assoc. Prof. of O.T. at Luther Seminary provides for us so well: "God calls Abraham seemingly out of the blue in Genesis 12 to leave homeland and kin in order to go to a land he has never seen. And God makes a three-fold promise to Abraham, or Abram, as he's called in chapter 12:

- 1) That Abraham will have many descendants; he'll be a "great nation" (12:2).
- 2) That Abraham and his descendants will inherit the land of Canaan (12:7).
- 3) That they will be a blessing to the whole world (12:3).

There is one major problem with this scenario, though," Professor Schifferdecker writes, "-- Abraham and Sarah have no children [for although] we don't know much of anything about Abraham before chapter 12, one thing we do know is that his wife Sarai/Sarah is barren. It's hard to be the ancestor of a "great nation" if you don't have even one child. As one of my professors in graduate school was fond of saying in regards to this story: "Infertility is hereditary. If your parents didn't have any children, you won't either."

See, Old Testament scholars can be funny, too!

Here we see that Abraham and Sarah have followed Yahweh throughout their very long lives. From following an unexpected call early on to journey to a land they know not of to accepting the promises of God even though, as a childless couple, they had a hard time fathoming how Abraham could have many descendants who would become a blessing to the whole world. And so at age 90 when Sarah hears one of their unexpected visitors tell Abraham that he will return in due season and that she will have a son then, she does what most if not all of us would do – she laughs.

"Impossible," you can hear her thinking as the mirth rises from her lungs. "I know Jehovah promised it, but I can't imagine it. Am I really supposed to have such pleasure when my husband and I are as old as the hills?"

But God, listening around every corner, hears her laugh and asks Abraham why. "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" God asks, and Sarah afraid of God denies her laughter, but God says, "Oh yes, you did laugh!" Not chastising her, but acknowledging her very human response and granting the promise anyway so that in a delicious ironic twist, they have a son a name him Isaac which means laughter.

"There is humor here, perhaps even comedy, but it is comedy in the classical sense, in the way that Dante's great work was titled the *Divine Comedy*," notes Professor Schifferdecker. "This isn't comedy in the sense of 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. It's what Frederick Buechner calls "high comedy": "the high comedy of Christ that is as close to tears as the high comedy of Buster Keaton or Marcel Marceau or Edith Bunker is close to tears -- but glad tears at last, not sad tears, tears at the hilarious unexpectedness of things rather than at their tragic expectedness."

Here we have a God who absolutely delights in our human emotions having created us in Her own image.

“O wondrous creatures,” muses Hafiz, “by what strange miracle
Do you so often Not smile?”

I believe there is a never-ending source of life and love coming from above and God looks for us to rejoice in it. Sarah laughed because she couldn't image that the life force coursing through her veins could still do that which God had promised. She had shut down but God never had. As long as I'm with you the life force continues and I am always producing, says Yahweh.

“I take genuine comfort in knowing that my own doubts and denials, the lies I tell myself to rationalize my disbelief, and the times that I scoff at the likelihood of divine intervention in my puny affairs, are not only standard fare for normal human nature, but also the raw material of God's salvation history,” writes Rev. Daniel Clendenin in his article, “God has Brought Me Laughter.” “They might deserve a divine rebuke like Sarah received, but they don't constitute an ultimate obstacle to divine action in my own little story.”

As we turn to Psalm 100 we see even more freedom for God's people to exalt in God not only for who God is but for how God has made us and loves us. “It IS God that made us, and we are God's; we are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture.”

So make a joyful noise, worship with gladness, come into God's presence with singing and enter God's gates with thanksgiving.

“Laughter” by Hafiz

What is Laughter? What is Laughter?
It is God waking up! O it is God waking up!

It is the sun poking its sweet head out
From behind a cloud
You have been carrying too long.
Veiling your eyes and heart.

It is Light breaking ground for a great Structure
That is your Real body— called truth.

It is happiness applauding itself and then taking flight
To embrace everyone and everything in this world.

Laughter is the polestar
Held in the sky by our Beloved
Who eternally says,
"Yes, dear ones, come this way,
Come this way toward Me and Love!

Come with your tender mouths moving
And your beautiful tongues conducting songs
And with your movements— your magic movements
of hands and feet and glands and cells— Dancing!

Know that to God's Eye,
All movement is a Wondrous Language,
And Music—such exquisite, wild Music!"

O what is laughter Hafiz?
What is this precious love and laughter
Budding in our hearts?

It is the glorious sound
Of a soul waking up!

Amen.