

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Laughter”  
Genesis 18:9-15  
Genesis 21:1-7**

**Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
June 18, 2017**

### **Genesis 18:9-15**

They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord 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 hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

### **Genesis 21:1-7**

[One year later,] the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. 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. And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

### **“Laughter”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Laughter is a powerful and telling physical rendition of our emotional state. For instance, there’s the jovial laughter after hearing a good joke. There’s the nervous laughter after hearing a bad joke. You have the raucous guffaw of a child and the skeptical chortle of a critic. We use laughter to tell someone we enjoy their company. We use laughter to mask our embarrassment. Laughter has its place, as Solomon so wisely reminds us, there is “a time to laugh; a time to mourn.”<sup>1</sup> Laughter, without a context, however, is nothing more than loud noises. J. K. Rowling utilizes this truth when in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the students at Hogwarts use laughter to defend against a magical creature. In that story, the boggart is a creature that exploits the secret fears of its victims by embodying that fear. The charm that Professor Lupin teaches the students is to imagine their fear as something funny and force the boggart into a comical state. Laughter here is used to defeat that which frightens.

As we read this morning, laughter is not something ignored by the Bible. Some things are not directly addressed by Scripture, like Newtonian physics, computer science, or Chinese history. The root word for laughter, on the other hand, appears over twenty-five times in the Old Testament. Laughter in the Bible takes many forms, just like it takes many forms today. There is

a happy laughter like that of carefree children in their play. Zechariah's vision of the redeemed society was a city that "shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets."<sup>2</sup> Was that also one of the reasons why Jesus made little children the symbol of the kingdom of God? There is a beauty in God's creation and an exhilaration in existence, which can give to all life an essential joyousness. Calvin was one of many who teach us that the created order, that is nature's beauty and wonder, provides glimpses of the almighty God. In this beautiful creation which God has made, we ought to be able to say with the Psalmist, "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy."<sup>3</sup>

Too often, however, religion is imagined to be represented by severity and somberness and a dour face. When I first mention Calvin to someone, one of their initial comments is on a perceived strictness about Calvin. And while it is true that Calvin and the Genevan Consistory required the citizens of that city to memorize catechisms in their native tongue and required weekly church attendance, Calvin was by no means a stiff-necked worshipper. It is from Calvin and the Reformation that we are encouraged to sing hymns in church. They encouraged people to engage with the Bible. He encouraged people to enjoy God. Moreover, the first question of the Westminster Larger Catechism asks and answers, "What is the primary and highest purpose of human beings? ...to glorify God and *enjoy him completely forever*."<sup>4</sup> True religion is a joyous affair. True religion should incite happiness in our salvation and delight in our calling.

There's also the laughter that comes from seeing the little absurdities of life, including especially our own. The egocentric person who acts as though he were a focus of creation looks at everything with a kind of suspicious grimace. He is too self-important to recognize that life may be ridiculous, and especially he can never take a joke on himself. But those who are conscious of the greatness of God can be simple hearted enough to laugh at what might be the exaggerated pretensions of their own littleness. When we can laugh at ourselves, we are able to not take ourselves so seriously. No mere mortal should ever take himself or herself too seriously. We are all flawed human beings. The only person who ever had the right to take himself seriously was Jesus Christ. While I try not to add or detract from Scripture, the Gospels only show us a glimpse of three years of Jesus' thirty. As a carpenter, a handyman as it were, I'm sure Jesus had opportunities to laugh at himself and at the absurdities of the human condition.

There are other kinds of laughter, however, which are not wholesome. There is the laughter which, the more it is careless, the less it is carefree—the loud, coarse laughter of men and women whose feverish efforts to amuse themselves still leave them miserable. They are looking for escape from thinking, escape from sin. If they can laugh loud enough, perhaps they can drown out the voice of iniquity that calls them away from heavenly fulfillment and toward temporal, limited revelry. This is the laughter that finds rapture in carnal desires, which lead not to salvation and life but to addiction and death. For the moment, it is easier and seems less painful to let everything be covered up by the kind of laughter that can be got out of a bottle of beer or out of the sensual joy of a liaison's kiss. But that laughter has nothing in it to warm the heart. Again, Solomon's wisdom teaches, "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools."<sup>5</sup>

And then there is the laughter of unbelief. Such was Sarah's laughter. The promise that was supposed to be from God seemed to her to be absurd. Calvin comments, "Having her mind fixed on the contemplation of the thing proposed, she only weighs what might be accomplished by natural means, without raising her thoughts to the consideration of the power of God, and thus rashly casts discredit on God who speaks to her."<sup>6</sup> Genesis 18:11 tells us that "Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah." In modern clinical parlance, Sarah is postmenopausal. While they didn't use those words, the ancients clearly recognized when a woman was past the age of child birth.

Sarah clearly recognized this within herself, which is why she scoffs at the visitor's words. Calvin is careful to note that she is not in open rebellion against God in her secret snicker. Instead, she "foolishly sets her own age and that of her husband in opposition to the word of God."<sup>7</sup> How often do we laugh at God's promises because we limit him to our nature? We get so wrapped up in our present mindset that we forget the mighty works that God can do. To have a general pious belief in God's existence is one thing; to trust that his power and grace could come with a wonderful blessing directly into Sarah's life was another. The world tells us that faith is nothing but naiveté. What's worse is that inside ourselves there is a vanity that is deathly afraid of being laughed at. So like Sarah, we may try to hide our most eager longings behind a laugh that tries to say, "You cannot fool me."

"The Angel chides Sarah," remarks Calvin, "because she limited the power of God within the bounds of her own sense."<sup>8</sup> Not only that, but she also lies to the Lord. In the secret recesses of her heart, she denies God's promise, but even the deepest, darkest corners of our heart are known to God. So when the visitor reveals her secret doubt, she "denies it, saying, 'I did not laugh.'" Moses tells us that she said this because she was afraid. This is the key for understanding our indignant laughter. There's a difference between unbelief and disbelief. In Mark's Gospel, there's an episode where Jesus exorcises an unclean spirit from a young boy. He tells this boy's father "All things are possible for one who believes." To this, the father responds, "I believe; *help my unbelief*."<sup>9</sup> The definition of unbelief is incredulity or skepticism.<sup>10</sup> While the definition of disbelief is the *refusal* to accept something as true.<sup>11</sup> Sarah had a moment of unbelief. I have moments of unbelief. Each of us has or will have moments of unbelief. It's not that we refuse to believe in God. It's that we allow the corruption of our nature to degenerate a healthy fear of God into a folly dictated by carnal reasoning. Because this was the context behind her laughter, and not flat out disbelief, the visitor promises that one year hence, a son will be born to Sarah and Abraham. And we'll see who has the last laugh.

And as we heard read, one year later, that's exactly what happened. "And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, *Isaac*." The name Isaac translates to "he laughs." Sarah's momentary laughter of unbelief is immortalized in the second Patriarch of God's chosen people. When we move beyond our moments of unbelief, we open ourselves up to holy laughter. We have holy laughter because of our adoption through the work

of Jesus Christ. There's no better or bigger cosmic joke than the very resurrection of Christ. At the very moment when the devil believed that he had won, God says, "Gotcha!" The punch line is this: sin and death have no victory over Jesus Christ, they have no victory over those anointed by his blood. We laugh with God not because we have eternal salvation, not because Satan is a loser, but because God, out of his great love for us, extended to us grace and mercy. To that, the very least we can do, is smile in thanksgiving.

Let us pray. Thank you, God, for your gift of Jesus Christ. Without him we know we would be lost to sin and death, and not an ounce of true and everlasting joy would ring from our lips. We rejoice in you because you are merciful and just. We laugh with your creation because you allow us to enjoy you on this earth. Help us when it is hard to laugh. Help us when we laugh in unbelief. Help us when we laugh in fear. Open our hearts to the cosmic ramifications of the resurrection. Move us to laughter with those who laugh in the midst of joy; and move us to tears with those who cry in the midst of anguish. Do not let sin spoil our enjoyment of you. This we pray in Jesus' holy and precious name. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:4

<sup>2</sup> Zechariah 8:5

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 126:2

<sup>4</sup> Evangelical Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 2009. Page 59

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:6

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.html>. Page 360

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, 361.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 9:23-24

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/unbelief?s=t>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/disbelief?s=t>