

A Laughing Matter

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 5, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" God said, "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham ...

[The Lord] said to [Abraham], "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then [the Lord] 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. [The Lord] 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."

(Genesis 17:1-7, 15-22; 18:9-15; 21:1-7, NRSV)

When my wife Lisa and I met and fell in love, she realized early on that for all my nerdiness in the Bible and theology and useless trivia, I *did* have at least one *serious* hole in my education – *musicals!* West Side Story ... South Pacific ... Seven Brides for Seven Brothers ... Camelot – most of these I had never seen. I had heard some of the songs, but usually didn't know where they came from. Well, Lisa fixed that *real* quick. And so now, you know what? I *love* musicals! I love it when ordinary people going about ordinary things suddenly start dancing, laughing, and singing!

Now, having seen most of the classics and then branching out, I have to confess that my favorite is the silliest of them all ... If you know well, it might not take you too many guesses ... Not exactly Camelot ... It's *SPAMALOT*, from the English comedy troupe Monty Python! Are there any Monty Python fans in the house today? I think the musical is absolutely brilliant, though of course, it *is* very, *very* silly.

One of the songs from *Spamalot* – actually this song was made famous in an earlier Monty Python movie – is called “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.” Do you know this song? I want to share some of the lyrics with you. By the way: this may well be the first time a Monty Python song has ever been quoted in a sermon here, so let's make history together:

*Some things in life are bad
They can really make you mad
Other things just make you swear and curse
When you're chewing on life's gristle
Don't grumble, give a whistle
And this'll help things turn out for the best ...*

*And ... always look on the bright side of life...
Always look on the light side of life ...*

*If life seems jolly rotten
There's something you've forgotten
And that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing
When you're feeling in the dumps
Don't be silly chumps
Just purse your lips and whistle—that's the thing*

*And...always look on the bright side of life...
(more whistling ...)
Always look on the light side of life ...*

And so it goes. Obviously, this is a very silly song. I used to think it represents a kind of chirpy optimism that doesn't see life as it really is. But now that I've looked at it again, I think that's wrong. It's actually pretty honest about life, and all the stuff life's going to throw at us. And yet,

in the face of those challenges, it advises us to laugh and smile and dance and sing. And it got me wondering: Could Monty Python actually be teaching us something about faith, a faith which looks at the world with eyes wide open, sees it for what it really is, but which refuses to be overcome by life's uncertainty, and instead chooses laughter? Isn't this what honest faith is all about?

I figure most of us were raised to think that faith in God, faith in Christ, is a deadly serious thing. After all, we associate it with the most important choices in life, not to mention possible eternal consequences. Faith, it would seem, is no laughing matter.

But in our scripture for today, faith is *precisely* a laughing matter! Abraham was nearly a hundred years old, and his wife Sarah was ninety, when God showed up and once again promised to give them a child ... in fact, more children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren than all the stars in the sky. When Abraham heard this, it nearly knocked him out. As the story says, he fell on his face, laughing. Later in the story, Sarah is hiding behind the tent, eavesdropping, and when she hears God's promise, she starts laughing too!

So why did Abraham and Sarah laugh? Author Frederick Buechner answered this question in a most memorable way:

They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half-believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true, they would REALLY have something to laugh about, and in the meantime, it helped keep them going.

God doesn't seem all that upset by Abraham and Sarah's laughter. You might think laughing in the divine face would be a major no-no, but God gets in on the joke, telling them, when their son is finally born, they should call him *Isaac*, which in Hebrew means "laughter." Maybe sometimes faith *is* a laughing matter!

But of course, the joke was really on Abraham and Sarah. Isaac wasn't born until about *15 years* after God first made the promise. And that meant for about 15 years, Abraham and Sarah had to carry that promise around. It also meant that for about 15 years Abraham and Sarah had to endure not only their own laughter, but everyone else's. But the day finally came, and the promise was kept, and Isaac, the son of laughter, was born. Then Abraham and Sarah really had something to laugh about.

So, what are we to make of this silly story, where the father and mother of our faith laugh it up? Could there be a connection between laughter and faith? I think so. Laughter shows a kind of humility. It's an acknowledgement that we don't have all the answers, that we don't really know what's going on, that we're not in control. Laughter shows a kind of surrender, a

surrender to God, a surrender to the universe, a surrender to the surprises that life throws our way. To be able to laugh in the face of life's uncertainty shows a deep level of trust in something greater than ourselves.

And I think that when we have some fun, even or *especially* in worship, we are living out this truth. We are carrying on this heritage. We should be very thankful that God's promise was first received by people who could laugh. And when we trust in God and laugh too, we show ourselves to be chips off the old block! You could say that our souls truly *are* rockin' in the bosom of Abraham!

It's funny – I can't even say that phrase "bosom of Abraham," without a chuckle 😊. Isn't that great?! You know, scripturally, the phrase "bosom of Abraham" comes not from Genesis, but from the 16th chapter of Luke in Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. On earth, Lazarus lived in poverty, but in death is taken by angels to the "bosom of Abraham" where he is poor no longer and enjoys eternal life in joy and peace. And so, as Christianity developed over the centuries, the phrase came to be synonymous with Heaven, with Paradise. But originally, it was more "down to earth" than this. The expression was originally drawn from an old Jewish belief that the righteous would rest by Abraham's side in the world to come.

As Kevin wrote for a monthly newsletter once, the word for "bosom" in the Greek is *kolpos*, meaning lap or side of a person. It refers to a place of honor reserved for a special guest at a feast. According to ancient Jewish custom, each guest leaned on his left elbow in order to leave the right arm free, and because two or more people lay on the same couch, the head of one man was near the breast of the one next to him, hence he was said to lie "in the bosom" of the other.

The Jews then extended this image to the world after death, where the righteous were rewarded by sharing in a banquet with Abraham, the father of the faith, and join in deep fellowship with him. And you *know* that banquet would be a hoot, because Abraham knew how to laugh! It's probably why he and Sarah lived so long in the first place!

Indeed, we should be *very* thankful that God's promise was received and carried forward by people who could laugh. We all know people who can't. We all know people who would sit through *Spamalot* with their arms folded and a grumpy harrumph. But that's harmless. Less harmless is people who can't laugh at life, and instead live in anger and fear. And maybe most harmful of all is *religious* people who can't laugh. Because when religion loses its sense of humor (or never develops one in the first place), it becomes very dangerous indeed.

I said there's a connection between laughter and faith. What I mean to say is there's a connection between laughter and *healthy* faith. I also think there's a connection between the *inability* to laugh and *unhealthy* faith – what we might call *toxic* faith. Of course, toxic faith is not only found in other religions and in other parts of the world. There are more than a few "true believers" in our own religion who don't know how to laugh, and who take their faith and their God with deadly seriousness. So much religion today presents itself as being so deadly

serious, and what the world really needs right now - in an age of so much division and despair - is a faith that can laugh ... laugh at itself, laugh at life, and laugh in joy at the surprises of God.

Here's the thing: At the end of the day, we really only have two choices. We can live with healthy faith, with laughter and humility and trust, open to surprises and newness – like Abraham and Sarah. Or we can live with toxic faith (or maybe we should say, with no faith at all), driven by fear and anger, threatened by those who are different, threatened by the future. Toxic faith is tearing our world apart.

It is my deepest hope that *we* will be a people of *healthy* faith, a people who provide healing and wholeness, welcome and hospitality, refuge and respect, safety and peace, love and laughter, for *all* God's children. The world desperately needs the healing that healthy faith can bring. And maybe that healing begins with laughter. Faith really *can* be a laughing matter. There will always be some who will *not* laugh along ... there will always be some who will not join in the dance ... but our sacred stories promise us that, in the end, *all* will be invited, and *God* will have the last laugh.

To the Glory of God! Amen.