

## **“Sarah Laughed”**

**Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7**

Why do we laugh? I ask that question this morning, because this First Sunday after Easter is, traditionally, Holy Humor Sunday. It's also, as those of you who've been reading my Daily Devotionals know, Quasimodo Sunday. Yes, That Quasimodo! More importantly, though, I ask this question because our Old Testament lesson from Genesis is full of accounts of laughter; in fact, laughter is the most often mentioned action in the passage. Sarah, especially, laughs. Philosopher and playwright, George Bernard Shaw, once said, "When a thing is funny, search it for a hidden truth." That's a good idea. So, what's the "truth" about laughter in our lesson this morning? Why did Sarah laugh?

Well, Sarah laughed, first, at the futility of her situation. Sarah was childless. In our day, we can barely appreciate the humiliation she felt over this fact. In Sarah's day, the primary purpose of a woman was to bear children for her husband; to bear him an heir to carry on his name and lineage. In that day, to be childless was not viewed as a simple reproductive dysfunction. Rather, it was seen as proof of God's disfavor. A childless wife was a disgrace to her husband; a failure in her primary function as a woman. There had to be nights when Sarah cried herself to sleep. "What's the matter with me?" she would ask. "Why am I being punished like this?" Now, she is an elderly woman; well passed child-bearing years. She has long ago given up. Suddenly, a message comes from God: she will have a son. It's such an absurd notion. So, Sarah laughed.

"I laughed to keep from crying." How many times have we heard or even used that expression? One major function of humor is to release tension. That's why so much of the best comedy is about embarrassing and awkward situations we've all shared. Laughter helps us deal with our deepest fears. We identify with the comic. "That's me," we think to

ourselves. But, at the same time we recognize that the finger is pointed elsewhere this time, and so, with a sigh of relief, we laugh.

It is a sign of acceptance when people can laugh at their own situation. A determining factor in life, as we all know, is not what our situation is, but how we deal with that situation. Sarah laughed; first, because of the futility of her situation.

But there is another reason for Sarah's laughter here: hopeful anticipation. Hers was the nervous laughter of a person who wants to believe in the impossible but feels foolish doing so. You and I have been there too: the desire to believe that our world is not a closed system of cold determined definitions and predetermined outcomes; that there is a reality that transcends and transforms. Where would the Hollywood and Broadway musicals be if we could not believe that somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly; if we did not dream the impossible dream, climb every mountain, ford every stream? As the great social philosopher of our time, Kermit the Frog, has so profoundly pondered, "Why are there so many songs about rainbows?"

Children have no problem with such stuff. They will clap their hands in glee over the prospect that the impossible will indeed occur. Part of the Good News of the Gospel is that we need never lose that childlike wonder about life. Part of the work of faith is to help us discover, and continually rediscover, how to think young.

In truth, it takes a long time to become truly young. A famous writer was passing a hospital one day, that had this sign out front, "Home for Incurable Children." With a twinkle in his eye, he was heard to remark, "They'll get me in there one of these days." There it is. That is what we should strive for; to be incurable children; to regard the world with awe and wonder, to expect that somewhere, somehow, two and two can

add to three, or even five, as they do in the mathematics of music theory.

Some in our world would have us believe that everything in life is definable, knowable, and predictable. Yet each of us knows in our heart of hearts that such is not the case. We may not be too vocal about it, but we can recall the times when we had our backs to the wall, and suddenly there was an open door: the opportunity from nowhere to climb out of the hole we'd dug ourselves into; the improbable rescue from the impossible circumstance. In a discussion with other others we will term it coincidence, good fortune, luck. But, deep within our souls there is a little boy or little girl clapping hands in glee, whispering, "Thank you, God!"

Don't let the closed-minded tell you that X plus Y always equals Z. There is a force in this world that the unimaginative will not reckon with. It is the world of mystery and miracle; it is the world of advanced particle physics, and of neuroscience, of dark matter and dark energy that are unknowable and don't quite "add up," yet must be. It is the world governed by the Spirit, a world that is wonder-filled and wonderful. As G.K. Chesterton, the British theologian and writer, author of the Fr. Brown Mysteries, once said, through Fr. Brown, "The thing about miracles is, sometimes they happen!"

Sarah laughed; in futility at her situation, but, also in hopeful anticipation of what God might yet do for her. But there is one more reason she would laugh: Sarah would laugh in joy. The end of our story shows us Sarah cradling her newborn son, Isaac. Isaac's name in Hebrew, by the way, means "Laughter." There was baby Laughter in her arms. It was all so absurd.

The French existentialists like Camus and Sartre, have tried to tell us that, because life is absurd, there is no purpose for a God. But they've

got it backwards. It is the absurd in life that gives us hope: The King of Kings born in a stable, a blood-stained cross of death that becomes a symbol of life and salvation, a motley group of farmers, fishermen, zealots, and tax collectors, and women of assorted and sometimes sordid backgrounds, who believe that their leader has been raised from the dead, and with that belief as their touchstone, take over an empire. The absurd; actually, the miraculous, happening in the lives of saints and sinners ever since, down to this very living moment, the anticipation that the impossible can happen and will happen for you and me, that fearful, yet gleeful prospect given in the Gospel and born out in your life and mine. All of it speaks to us, calls out to us, confronts us, with the reality of the Living God, present, and at work even now in this moment in our lives.

Sarah laughed! The laughter of millions over all past ages to the present who have discovered that God is; and that God cares. Whatever your situation at this moment, take heart! Rejoice in hope. God gives, and will yet give, you reason to laugh.