Springfield Presbyterian Church

April 14th, 2024

God Brought Me Laughter

1. Interpretation

This is one of my favorite passages of the Bible – the one

where Sarah laughs. It’s so human, so authentic, and so real. As I was reading it again this week, though, I sat and considered how people across time and culture would read this passage. Often, the Old Testament has been chalked up to ‘the mean God’ passages and the New Testament has ‘the nice God.’

I think there is some slight validity in that notion – at least in the sense that there are some things in the Old Testament that we can’t get away from – those things that are awful without interpretation, from floods, to murders, to kingdoms falling. It could be easy to put the Old Testament in the corner. Yet, we have some really beautiful texts too – like the psalms that remind us of what it means to be in relationship with God, or the prophets like Jeremiah who are young but vibrant, or Isaiah who points to our Messiah in saying, “The people who walked in darkness, will see a great light.” There’s a lot of good in the Old Testament too – if we only use our courage and curiosity to investigate further.

Now, for the text at hand, here’s where I love the interpretation. I think some people for centuries have used this verse to give Sarah a hard time. Sarah laughed – how dare she. She laughed at God. And she was fearful and put in her place and God saw she laughed. Bad Sarah. You could use this, like many Scriptures, to tear down women, to dismiss laughter, or to degrade the human experience.

Yet, I think that’s an awful interpretation. I think how you read it depends on how you understand God. See, the God I serve is Love personified. God laughs with me, God cries with me, God stands with me in justice. For me, God really is Emmanuel – or translated, God-with-us. God is for us, with us, in us, and around us. God is good.

So, when I read this passage, I hear a very human Sarah laugh. She laughs because the idea is ridiculous – and I would laugh too. A baby? At my age? Oh, Lord, I mean, I’ve wanted a child, but there’s no way. Her laughter probably has different layers – she’s been a barren woman for her entire life, so maybe this touches her heart in a tender place and she laughs because this experience of not having a child is all she knows. Or maybe her laughter is also one of anticipation, one of – by golly, I mean, that would be amazing! The laughter is a human response to something that feels so far off. Is the laughter doubt? Maybe, maybe not – but even if it was, I believe in a God who would stand with her in the doubt.

So, Sarah laughs. And God hears. Now, when God hears, all I can imagine is God up in the skies with a loving smirk. With this sense of – Oh, my child, Sarah, I know you are laughing and I know why, but just wait. And when God acknowledges the laughter, Sarah gets scared. She didn’t mean to disrespect God, and now she wonders if that laughter is going to turn into punishment.

But we know the story; we hear the story – Sarah becomes a mother to the nations. She bears a child in her old age and he is named Isaac, meaning ‘the one who laughs or rejoices.’ Indeed, amidst the laughter, amid the miracle, God did not deny her but joined her in the laughter. God brought Sarah laughter, and God longs to bring laughter to you and me.

1. Laughter

So, inspired by the call to laugh, I looked up a few fun facts about

laughter that I’d like to share with you this morning. Studies have shown that humans laugh before they speak and even those born who are deaf and blind still have the ability to laugh – it is an innate emotion. Studies at the University of Maryland found that hilarious movies improved the function of blood vessels and blood flow for those in their 20s and 30s. Other studies at the University of Maryland also showed laughter increased immunity, helped regulate blood sugar, and improved sleep.

Laughter has significant health benefits and I have to believe that the God of us all, who wants the best for us all, has given us laughter as a gift. The challenge for us is – how do we accept the gift, how do we find laughter in our lives, how are we alert to it?

One way we do this is by slowing down. Sabbath has many gifts, but slowing down lets us reconnect to God and to one another. We find laughter when our bodies are a bit more relaxed, when we hear stories and share jokes, we find laughter when we see little ones being silly. Laughter, most of the time, requires some intentionality.

Something I’ve been doing in the last year is being careful about what I watch before I go sleep. Let me share this example, I used to put on Netflix before bed and watch a riveting documentary – but there was one night where I watched a documentary on Dahmer. Now, while that would’ve been alright to watch during the daytime, let’s say I didn’t sleep through the night so well. So, I thought about it and now all I’ll put on before I go to sleep is stand-up comedy.

Now, I know, there’s some comedy out there that’s a bit brazen, but with the advent of Netflix and Drybar comedy, there’s so much good clean comedy out there to enjoy. And, my goodness, I laugh. I laugh so hard. On a few occasions, I found myself going off to sleepy land with a smile on my face from a joke that just spoke to me. This is all to say – be intentional about what you watch and what you bring into your life.

1. Relationships

I hope you have a person in your life who makes you laugh. It

doesn’t have to be your partner, or a parent, or a child. But just one person, at least, who just makes you erupt in laughter. One of those people in my life is my brother. I don’t get to see him that often, but his greatest character strength to me is his dry sense of humor. My brother is quiet – he doesn’t often speak – he is an observer and listens. Yet, when he opens his mouth and offers a one-liner, we’re all down for the count with laughter.

I also have a few friends who have led me to laughter with tears in my eyes – and those are great friends to have. I hope you have or are willing to seek out those people who make you laugh and also that you can give the gift of laughter when the call comes.

1. Laughter in God’s House

So, to round this all out – I think that God has given us laughter

and it is a gift, meant to be used for our health and wellbeing. God laughs with us. God longs for us to bring laughter to others and longs for us to find laughter too. God rejoices in this, celebrates with us, and stands with us every emotion. God also calls us to seek out the laughter – to be intentional, to find it, to know that it is there and to be present to the laughter amongst us in community.

And you know, the Presbyterians are called the ‘frozen chosen’ – we’re often seen as so serious and intellectual and we can be. That’s not inherently bad, but let’s not get lost in our heads. You can laugh in God’s house. You can smile in God’s house. You can be everything you need to be here, you can bring all of yourself here. So let the laughter rise. Alleluia and amen.