

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, June 15, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"BIBLICAL LAUGHTER"

Genesis 18:1-15; Genesis 21: 1-7 (sermon text verse 6)

On father's day we tell stories about fathers. A grade two class was asked to write about their personal heroes. One father was pleased to find out that his daughter had chosen him and asked why. "Because," she said, "I can't spell Arnold Schwarzenegger."

One Sunday a minister was asking the children about influences in their lives. "Who taught you to count?" he asked. "My dad," said Tommy. "Great, Tommy," said the minister. "What comes after eight?" Tommy answered confidently, "Nine." "And what comes after nine?" "Ten," Tommy said triumphantly. "And what comes after ten?" the minister asked. Tommy answered, "A jack." We learn lots from our fathers, don't we?

Erma Bombeck wrote that when God was creating fathers he started with a tall frame. A female angel said, "If you're going to make children so close to the ground, why have you put fathers up so high? He won't be able to shoot marbles without kneeling, tuck a child in bed without bending, or kiss a child without stooping." God smiled and said, "Yes, but if I make him child-size, who would children have to look up to?" What a privilege it is for fathers - to be someone your children can look up to, not only physically but also for spiritual and moral and character-building guidance.

We sing about father Abraham, but for a long time it seemed that he would never be a father; nor would his wife Sarah be a mother. The Bible says that they were old; advanced in years; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Abraham was as good as dead. It was hopeless. And what made this so distressing was that when God brought Abraham from Ur to Canaan, God said to him, "I will give this land to your descendants and I will make of you a great nation." But there was no descendent, not one.

But one day three visitors suddenly showed up at Abraham's tent. Abraham bowed to them and showed great hospitality. These were no ordinary visitors. They asked, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" (as if they didn't already know!) "Over there in the tent," he said. One said, "I will surely return to you in due season and... Sarah shall have a son." From the tent Sarah overheard and

laughed to herself, "Give me a break!" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Sarah denied laughing for she was afraid. But the Lord said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

And the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore a son, and Abraham named him Isaac. And now Sarah laughed with joy. She said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." (Genesis 21:6) You have to smile as you picture Sarah out for a walk, cane in one hand, the other pushing a stroller. "What a lovely grandson (or great-grandson) you have," people say. "Think again," Sarah replies, "This is my own dear son!"

The theme today is Biblical laughter. Some of our ancestors didn't think laughter was appropriate in church. Thankfully, those days have changed. Laughter is God's gift to us. In fact, the Bible says that God laughs. According to Psalm 2, God laughs at the puffed-up pride and pretensions of men. And God has a sense of humour, too, which we see in Jesus. Now Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but in taking on human flesh, he must have often laughed with his family and friends. "God has brought laughter for me." Let's think about God's gift of laughter.

First, of all, this gift has healing power.

Have you ever noticed how shared laughter can overcome tensions and bridge gaps between people, cultures, even nations? Fellowship is created when people laugh together. Our spirits are lifted.

One minister tells of chairing his first Board meeting at his new church. This was back when elders of the church tended to be, shall we say, elderly, and of course, were all men. They were all watching him carefully and he wanted to make a good first impression. He started off with a joke. No one laughed except the minister himself, and that was from nervous tension. While laughing he leaned back in the chair. The joke had fallen flat, and so did the minister as the chair fell to pieces beneath him. The amazing thing was that before he could get up from the floor he found himself really laughing, laughing at himself, and at the whole ridiculous situation. All the Board members were laughing too. He said, "We were friends and brothers from that moment on."

Laughing with others can be healthy; so too can laughing at ourselves. It can save us from pompous self-righteousness.

There was a young preacher who outdid himself one Sunday morning. He had

preached what he felt was an excellent sermon and some people in the congregation told him so. Walking home with his wife he asked aloud, "I wonder how many really great preachers there are in the world today?" His wife replied, "One less than you think, dear." No, I'm not telling that story on myself.

Laughter is good medicine, they say, bringing peace to our souls, bridging the gap between people and binding us together in our common humanity, and even helping us through difficult times.

When Nazi troops invaded Denmark during World War 2, they paraded into Copenhagen, line after line of booted soldiers, high-stepping in formation, down the street - strutting, proud, invincible. At first, the Danes watched Hitler's soldiers in silence. Then a little titter was heard in the crowd, then chuckles, and then uproarious laughter. For the Nazis looked ridiculous as they marched along and the Danes saw them for what they were. Now certainly the Danes were also grieved. They knew that great suffering lay ahead of them and that those soldiers would control their lives for a while. But they could see that such human pride must fall and they laughed at it and that helped them through those dark years. "God has brought laughter for me." God gives us laughter, laughter to heal and strengthen us.

But we must also say that there are times when it is inappropriate to laugh.

"There is a time to laugh," says Ecclesiastes. But there are times not to laugh. Sometimes we are just too hurt or disappointed or sad to laugh. And when someone else laughs, you can't join in. Their laughter grates on you. God gives us laughter, but like any of God's good gifts it must be used appropriately. We need to be sensitive to those times when others can't laugh with us. And of course there are times when it's inappropriate to laugh at others. I'm sure we've all felt the sting, certainly when we were young, but perhaps even when we are older, of people's mocking and sarcastic laughter. There are times not to laugh.

But there's a more serious issue with inappropriate laughter. It's that we sometimes laugh at God. Sarah erupted with laughter at God's incredible promise and it was a cynical laugh, a laugh of unbelief. Now to her credit, she realized afterward that she shouldn't have laughed like that.

But the tendency in a sinful world is to laugh at Almighty God, to mock his character and commandments. And mocking God and his ways doesn't seem to make some people afraid, as it did for Sarah. They don't see anything wrong with it. But to laugh off God or to laugh at God without repentance has

consequences for this life and the life to come. The Bible tells us that "God is not mocked; what a person sows so shall they reap." "God has brought me laughter," but there are times when it is inappropriate to laugh.

Finally, God's gift of laughter can lead to faith. "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."

You see, sometimes God causes us to laugh in sheer wonder. How can you not laugh in sheer amazement when you see the God of the Bible and how he fulfills his promises. God promises to form a new nation, a nation that will bless the world. And God doesn't make this promise to the Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie of the day; that would be too easy. Instead, God makes the promise to a most unlikely couple and keeps them waiting to the breaking point and beyond, for at one point Abraham takes the promise into his own hand and has a son with Hagar his slave women. But Ishmael was not the son of promise. And God finally fulfills the promise when Isaac is born to this aged couple. Sarah laughed and we laugh too. Nothing is too hard for the Lord.

This kind of thing happens throughout the Bible. Just think of the wonderful world and the sheer variety of creation that God made out of nothing. "Consider the hippopotamus," says God to Job. "Can you make anything like that?" You must laugh at a God who conceives of such a creature and delights in it. God takes unlikely people like the cheater Jacob and the ill-tempered murderer Moses, and Rahab the harlot, and Gideon, the least of his clan, and uses them for his mighty purposes. This God promised to come to his people and fulfilled that promise by coming in the boy Jesus born to a virgin named Mary. And when God's own dear Son was crucified at the hands of lawless men, God raised him from the bonds of death and made him Lord and Saviour of all. God took the old rugged cross, that emblem of suffering and shame and turned it into the sign of the world's redemption, the promise of forgiveness and eternal life for you and me. God sent the Holy Spirit and used twelve ordinary men as the core of the greatest spiritual movement the world has ever seen. The God of the Bible takes a zealous church persecutor like Saul and turns him into Paul, the greatest-ever ambassador for Jesus Christ. This God takes sinners like you and me and forgives us on not on the basis of our earning but on the basis of his grace and mercy in mercy. God makes us into children of the King called to use our own gifts and talents for his service.

Nothing is too hard for this God. Nothing can stop his eternal purposes from being fulfilled, not the age of Abraham and Sarah, not the power of sin and evil, not human pride, not even a sealed tomb. When you read the Bible story you just have to laugh in wonder at what this God does and how he fulfills promises

against all human expectation. And from that laughter comes our deep desire to love and serve this God. From that laughter comes faith, faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His Son.

“God has brought laughter for me.” Biblical laughter, true joy is rooted in God’s character, in the victory of Jesus Christ and in God’s unstoppable promises. In Revelation John sees the time when “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

And even if you can’t laugh now, you will. For Jesus said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”