

April 19, 2020 – Give To Us Laughter

With Rev. John Ambrose

OPENING PRAYER:

In this Season of Easter, O God, open our hearts, our minds, and our lives to your message of hope. May we be both humbled and inspired as we continue to hear stories of light breaking through darkness, of laughter in the midst of pain, and of life emerging from death.

We pray in the name of the Risen Christ. AMEN

LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Light a candle (real, battery or imaginary) and say the following:

We light this candle now on this the second Sunday of Easter, acknowledging our deep desire to feel the joy of communing with God and of being in the presence of the risen Christ. May we dance, sing and laugh celebrating the Spirit.

SCRIPTURE READING : GENESIS 18 and 21 (Selected verses)

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way, now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three measures of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread." Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

"Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.

MESSAGE: GIVE TO US LAUGHTER

This message has been prepared by Rev. Dr. John E. Ambrose for the Faith United Milton congregation on April 19, 2020, and shared with Palermo United. Any comments you might like to pass along after reading it could be sent to jambro@sympatico.ca. ©Rev. Dr. John Ambrose 2020. Provided here with permission.

Based on: Genesis 18: 1-15, 21:1-7

A little story from Britain: a young woman had boarded a bus in the late evening. Something was wrong with the lights on the bus, which had gone out. A tall man standing near her asked if he could help her find a strap. "O thank you," she replied, "but I have already found one." "Are you sure?" "Oh, quite," she assured him. "Then I wonder if you would mind letting go of my necktie?"

We have all been through a worrisome and distressing six weeks, doing our best to keep going in these circumstances. Two weeks ago, in the speech from Her Majesty the Queen, one phrase leapt out at me: that we deal with the present "with quiet, good-humoured resolve." It precisely captured the spirit behind today's message. Time and again, humour has risen from some of the most awful conditions. As it happens, for many centuries, the week following Easter in Orthodox and Catholic countries, was observed by the faithful as "days of joy and laughter". They celebrated with feasts and parties to mark Jesus' resurrection. Church-goers played practical jokes on each other, told funny stories, sang, and danced. The custom was rooted in the writings of some early church theologians -- like Augustine and John Chrysostom -- that God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. "Risus paschalis" -- "the Easter laugh." That's what the early theologians called it.



I retrieve this practice, not just for the sake of generating laughter in a distressing time, but to recall that humour has been woven into the fabric of our faith from earliest times. Jesus was not unaccustomed to regale his listeners with humour. For example: "How can you say to another, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?" You can hear his listeners howl with laughter.

A professor of preaching once remarked to a class that there is no place in a sermon for humour. The remark caught one student off guard: she burst out with a loud guffaw, sending the whole class into gales of

laughter. No one asked the professor to clarify what he meant by the remark; nor did the class buy into it. The remark, however, pointed out a mindset that may still persist: laughter does not belong in the church. Religion and solemnity are so tightly bound that some see humour as mocking the sacred.

Laughter is surely a gift of God to us, part of our being made in God's image. Scripture is not hesitant to report the laughter of God's people. Take, for example, the story in Genesis 18. The setting is the ancient town of Hebron. Abraham has pitched his tent near a grove of trees. The time is about noon on a hot day. A drowsy Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent. He hasn't noticed the approach of three strangers. When he looks up, it is as if they had appeared out of nowhere. He quickly rises to his feet and runs toward them, offering them hospitality in an effusive greeting. He invites them to rest under a tree out of the blazing sun, while a servant washes their feet and a sumptuous meal is prepared. He has no idea that this is a moment of divine visitation.

During the meal, the visitors ask about Sarah. Their knowing her name is the first clear sign that there's something unusual about these visitors. Sarah has not been introduced to them, and is not visibly present. Abraham replies that she is in the tent, which means she can hear everything being said, and they know it. One of them says they will come again in about a year, by which time Sarah will have given birth to a son. Now Sarah and her husband are both too old to have children. So, the statement triggers in her a very natural reaction; she laughs heartily. It's the laugh of an amused sceptic. After all, she's worn out. She's long past the reproductive stage. And Abraham laughs too. Surely this is a joke.

It turns out that it is not, and Sarah is rebuked, not so much for laughing as for harbouring doubt in the face of the promise of God. The rebuke is less a condemnation than a correction, a disciplined reminder that God has ways that are not always grasped by us.

The Hebrew word translated as "laugh" (tzachaq) has a range of meanings, positive and negative. There is, first, that sceptical, derisive laughter of Sarah. We can't believe that things really are as they are presented to us, even in religion. This is just too much. In a sense, God laughs back at us, saying in effect, "You wanna bet?" It's a laughter that can bring things down to a proper size. It's not meant to be hurtful, but it knocks the excessive seriousness out of some situations.

A while back, I read about some tense labour-management negotiations. The representative from one side, frustrated with the lack of progress, said there was no use talking any longer, shoved his papers into his briefcase, slammed it shut, rose from the table, grabbed his coat from a rack, and walked out... straight into a closet. After the laughter subsided, the two sides settled down to serious bargaining. This derisive, levelling laughter can bring things down to size, restore reality, and provide a necessary perspective.

There is the laughter that we might call 'deliverance' or 'liberation' laughter. It's the laughter which expresses a newly found freedom, hope, and joy. When the defeated people of Israel were prisoners in the land of Babylon, long miles from the happy places of their childhood, they sat down and wept when they remembered home, Zion. Their captors tormented them,

demanding of them "mirth and cheerful singing." "How," they asked, "shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Years later, when they found themselves back in Palestine, "then," they said, "our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongues with songs of joy." Deliverance laughter is something the Hebrew community has never lost. The once renowned psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, pointed this out in relation to the holocaust: that people laughed heartily even in the concentration camps. No matter how dark the night or bleak the day, somehow these odd hiccouging sounds would break out.

Laughter, that deep spirit of gladness, well-being, true joy, can make us whole again. It can undergird our faith as Christians. More than once in the early church, the Holy Spirit was called the "Happy Spirit". Sad and solemn faces just were not the mark of Christians.

We are living through a very serious moment in human history. As this difficult time passes, we face serious work to be done in society and in the church. We do not know what the future holds. But maybe an essential part of that work is not only to extend genuine care, but also to echo the joyous laughter of God in all that we say and do, and help a worried world restore its life and hope.

HYMN: GIVE TO US LAUGHTER (Voices United #624)

We invite you to sing along with the accompaniment of this lively, fun-filled song. Lyrics and visual notation are on the video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8Gqkk1ckq4>

CLOSING PRAYER:

Loving God, by the death and resurrection of your Beloved Son,
your reign of wholeness and hope has been unleashed,
your spirit of care has broken free in the service of others,
your gift of laughter has lifted despairing hearts,
and strengthened us as bearers of your world-redeeming love.
May the hope set free through the resurrection of Jesus
carry us through these challenging and uncertain days.
AMEN