

“The Covenant of Laughter”

Genesis 18:1-15

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Laughter is funny. Isn't it? Not funny, ha-ha, but funny-strange. Think about it for a minute. Why do we laugh? What makes us laugh? Think of things or situations to you that were very funny—why were they funny? Why did you laugh? Did you laugh because it was a surprise, that something happened that was unexpected? Did you laugh at something that happens to someone else and you're just glad it didn't happen to you? Did you laugh at something, not just thinking to yourself, “How funny!” but also, “How true!” What makes us laugh? How many of you have seen the movie, “The Princess Bride?” If you have not seen it, why not?! I feel like it is on all the time. If you haven't seen it, you should. In it, a princess is kidnapped by three men, Fezzig, a giant; Inigo Montoya, a famous swordsman seeking to avenge the death of his father “My name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die;” and the third, Vizzini, who is the brains of the operation. It is this character, played by Wallace Shawn who I think is so funny. As they are trying to escape with the princess, they are pursued by a mysterious “man in black.” But they set traps for him, knowing that there is no way that the mystery man will be able to follow them. Yet each time he defies this logic and when he does, Vizzini exclaims, “Inconceivable!” (or as Wallace Shawn would say, “incontheivable!”) And we laugh. Because sometimes we laugh, because something *is* inconceivable. We say to ourselves, “That could *never* happen.” And when it does, we laugh.

Other times though, we laugh with cynicism. Especially in today's world, we shake our heads thinking how ridiculous it is for someone to say that, try that, to do that, to believe that, even to

tweet that. They're being belligerent, petty and immature, stupid, or maybe they are naïve, gullible or blindly optimistic, and we laugh at them for doing or thinking something that crazy.

Or perhaps there is the laughter of confirmation, when something happens that others may not have foreseen but you did and so you laugh, "Ha! I knew it!" Or maybe sometimes we laugh because it's easier than crying and the world is going to break your heart anyway, so you might as well laugh.

For the last few weeks we have been talking about the idea of **covenant**—the relationship that we have with God and with one another. We began with the story of creation, affirming the idea that God makes a **covenant** with everyone, every human being created in God's image, to love and care for the world and one another. We read the story of Noah and the rainbow, which affirms that God will never, ever give up on us. And last week we heard God's call to Abram, which is a call to all of us to leave our comfort zone to go someplace new, to become something new. All of those stories tell us something about God but they also say something about our relationship with God, and with one another. And today we've heard a story about Sarah's laughter.

So why does Sarah laugh? Do you think she laughs because she's happy? Is she cynical? Maybe she laughs because she thinks that what these strangers are telling her husband is ridiculous. And it is. I mean, who are these guys anyway? Abraham is treating them like they're special. Hospitality is one thing, but this is over the top. Aren't they just three guys who came by hoping to get invited to lunch? But now they start making pronouncements about them having a baby. It's crazy. So, she laughs at them.

Or maybe it is nervous laughter. Abraham and Sarah can't have children. Sarah is post-menopausal. And Abraham is a hundred years old. But maybe she had once hoped to have children, back when her adulthood was still taking shape. Maybe it is a wound that had scabbed over with time and now these messengers are threatening to rip open that wound and heartache and she'll once again feel the pain of a barren womb? But maybe part of her wants to believe, don't you think? And maybe it is that part wants to bathe in the utter wonderful ridiculousness of it all but she is afraid, so she laughs. Now? Now, when that adulthood has been unfolded and lived out and she's come to accept that parenthood was just not to be? NOW they're supposed to become new parents? Inconceivable! And Sarah laughs, she laughs at these visitors, even if they aren't just guys who came to lunch, even if they are messengers from God. She laughs because that could never happen, or could it?

And the angels respond, "Is anything too wonderful for God?"

Is there anything too wonderful for God?

THAT is what we discover and rediscover about the **covenant** of God. It is inconceivable—but in a good way. It is more than we ever hoped or dreamed.

(Read Genesis 21:1-7)

The angels promised Sarah that she will give birth. Inconceivable, she laughs at them, but then she does. She gives birth to a son and they name him Isaac, which in Hebrew means "laughter." Because she laughs again, not with cynicism, but with joy, because she never saw this coming, never really believed it could happen. And so she laughs along with her son, Laughter.

Usually we don't see the Bible as a very funny book, but if you look, there is this kind of joyful, unexpected laughter throughout. Remember King David, spinning and dancing before the Lord as they brought the ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. I'm sure there was some joyful laughter there. That's what the Psalms are talking about when they say, "When the Lord had rescued Zion, then our mouth was filled with laughter," or where they get so excited they yell out, "Let the floods clap their hands, let the hills sing for joy together," because of what God has done for them. This is what the Lord himself is talking about when he says that on the day he laid the cornerstone of the earth "the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." It's this kind of laughter that Jesus means when he speaks about the return of the Prodigal Son and his father is so glad to see him that he can't help but throw a party and the whole house "began to make merry." It's ultimately what Jesus has in mind when he looks at the crowd in the Sermon on the Plain and says, "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh." It's what Paul means when he says in Romans, "he who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not also with him give us everything else?" And as the great preacher George Buttrick has said, that Jesus is crowned king in the hearts of those who believe in him and that inward coronation happens "among confession, and tears, and great laughter." The laughter of God and the laughter of the faithful happens because that which we had considered to be beyond our wildest imaginings is not near wild enough for God.

But why? Why does God pour such extravagant and inconceivable love on us?

A couple of years ago, our son Brandon was working as a chef at a very nice restaurant in downtown Boston. On one of our visits there, he wanted to show us the restaurant, and so since he wasn't working that night, he arranged to have dinner with us there. It was the eve of Brandon's 28th birthday and the night before he was to leave for a 5 week discovery of eating and

working in the eateries of Ireland, Spain, and wherever else this wanderlust of youth would take him. So it was a send off dinner as well.

I have to admit I balked a little when I saw the price on the menu because there we just one price for a dinner of appetizer, entrée and dessert. Prix fixe (joke about pronunciation) So I ordered a duck confit (whatever that is), followed by the chicken entrée, and then a rhubarb napoleon for dessert. But we were surprised when they immediately came out with a plate of a dozen oysters and a small bottle of champagne. On the house, just because it was us. Then the appetizers came and they were great, but then because I had ordered the duck, the chef sent out the fish appetizer for me also, because he thought it paired better with the duck. And then because we had just ordered the regular entrée, he also sent out a pasta course so we could try that.

Eventually the entrees came and they were terrific, but I admit I was looking forward to the dessert because I love rhubarb (rub hands)

But then—to our surprise--a waiter approached followed by another waiter and another and all together they held every dessert on the menu. Our table was covered with the most wonderful desserts you can imagine. It was so “over the top.” It was crazy extravagant. We laughed. It was inconceivable. Why did that happen? They wanted to show their love and appreciation for Brandon, he was one of theirs, and we were his parents. They wanted to celebrate his birth and make sure he would return to them when he got back from Europe. It was a joy for Brandon to see us so well treated. It was a joy for us to see Brandon so well-treated. It was a joy for them to see the joy on our faces. And I remember how we laughed. Inconceivable. Like Abraham’s angels, we were treated to the best of the best out of extravagant love.

And, it is the same way with God. His love for us is so great, the relationship, the **covenant** is so vital, that God goes over the top. What would it be for you? What has been inconceivable to

you? What would make you laugh out loud with joy? If the Cubs would win the World Series? Wait, that already happened, and what great laughter there was that night!

What about peace in a place that is torn by war? Feeding everyone in the world? Curing a disease? But what would it be for you? To find love again when you thought it had gone from your life? To have the burden of guilt lifted by forgiveness? To be reunited with those you love best and who love you most fully?

And what about our **covenant** relationship here in this church. Are we extravagant with one another? The pouring out of donations, assistance, and prayers for the youth on the mission trip is an immediate example. What about others. Are we extravagant in our love? Our forgiveness? Our ability to check our own egos, self-righteousness and blame of others; our openness to accept our own failures and our willingness to accept responsibility. And if we could practice covenant here, how much better would our lives outside the church become? To be more extravagant with our families, friends, colleagues and strangers.

To have it suddenly revealed to you how much your life means and what great purpose you have in the scheme of things? Ha! Wouldn't that make you smile and laugh and be filled with joy? Why should we think that's not the very thing God has in mind, to fill us with love and laughter and joy? As the angel says, "Is there anything too wonderful for God?" As Frederick Buechner says about our story today,

"Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they'd better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough."¹

1

Buechner, Frederick, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 153.

The covenant God makes with us is one of laughter, because in his steadfast love it is inconceivable to us the joys he has in store.