

FAITH AND LAUGHTER

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17

The legendary radio commentator Paul Harvey died a week ago at 90 years of age. I always loved the surprising conclusion he would bring following a commercial break: “*And now for the rest of the story...*” Our Old Testament story of the re-naming of Abram and Sarai cries for Paul Harvey treatment. God appeared to Abram and promised yet again that they would have descendents; they would in fact would become the parents of many nations. Given the new names of *Sarah* and *Abraham*, God reiterates the promise of children. I love the way that ancient story continues in verse 17:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

In the next chapter the Lord again appears to Abraham, this time in the form of three angels by the oaks of Mamre. This time God’s promise becomes even more explicit. “*By this time next year Sarah will bear a son.*” Sarah, eavesdropping on the conversation, had exactly the same response that old Abraham did. She laughed! In his tongue and cheek book of theological definitions, *Wishful Thinking, a Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner asks,

Why did the two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meanwhile it helped keep them going. (p. 25)

After Abraham fell on his face laughing, God told him the son to be born to them would be named *Isaac*, which means in Hebrew, “*he laughs.*”

Have you ever been invited to hold on to a promise so far fetched and crazy that you might as well laugh as cry at the hope of it ever coming true? So Martin Luther King, Jr. stood at the Lincoln Memorial and uttered those fateful words, *I have a dream!* That dream took a giant step forward in becoming reality this year when Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th President of the U.S.A. Susan B. Anthony campaigned tirelessly for over 50 years on behalf of women in this country to have the right to vote. 14 years after her 1906 death the 19th amendment made her dream a reality.

Bono of the Irish rock band, *U2* has become the unofficial spokesperson for the Millennium Development Goal of eliminating extreme poverty by 2015. Reducing 3rd world debt, reducing malaria, AIDs and other life-threatening diseases, empowering women, universal education, maternal health, environmental sustainability and a global

partnership, are the eight all but impossible tasks. But because of this world-wide campaign progress has been made – not nearly enough – but progress nonetheless towards eliminating extreme poverty in our lifetimes. We are still so far from it that it makes you laugh or cry, but it is the sort of promise God holds out for the world and invites us to live into.

At the level of a personal story *Slumdog Millionaire*, the surprise Academy Awards best picture of the year, shares the almost laughable dream of an uneducated child of the Bombay slums overcoming debasement, tragedy, suffering and loss to find love and succeed in the world. This descendent of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Sarah's maid Hagar, holds fast to his unrealistic hope and concludes from the Koran at the end of the movie, "*it is written.*"

What absurd, laughable promise has God invited you to believe in and trust? Maybe it is that you personally can make a difference in helping others through a particular charity. A month ago our guest preacher from *Food for the Poor*, Fr. John Moulman, told the story of a 12 year old girl who after a mission trip decided to raise money for Haiti by auctioning off her Princess Diana *Beanie Baby*. What difference could a little girl make against such devastating poverty? Surprisingly her *Beanie Baby* raised almost \$500. But then a wealthy individual in her church offered to match her gift as did another donor. A donor in the Midwest at the same time had offered to match whatever money was raised that week. Over \$3000 was raised by the gift of a *Beanie Baby*. This same girl, now a college student has personally raised tens of thousands of dollars to help people in Haiti. Perhaps God is inviting you to believe a laughable promise that you can make a difference in a country like Haiti, or against homelessness, or unemployment or hunger.

Maybe he is inviting you to believe the absurd promise that by living faithfully in his love and grace, by sharing that abundant life in community, by sharing principles of Christ's life with teens and children that God's Kingdom will be spread? That through your embodiment of his life future generations will hear of his grace and love?

Maybe it is the trust that somehow – you know not how – God will help you make it through this difficult economic time, when at present your balance sheet is tilted sharply to the red. Somehow – although it might make you laugh to think of it – God will help you through so that you will one day be a financial blessing to others.

Maybe St. John's in the midst of some of the worst economic time in decades can *rise* and rebuild our middle building and reach out in new ways to be beacon in the center of this city of Stamford to those in need, to the business community and to people who do not have a spiritual home? It might make us laugh to think of it but is that not a promise God is asking us to claim and believe?

When we hear Jesus' words to Peter and the rest of the Disciples we hear what a crazy and laughable faith we have. Only through Jesus' death will we find life. And only by offering our own lives can we gain life, true life. We must deny our life in order to find it. What kind of crazy faith is that?

The Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians called such faith,

...a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:23b-25)

And so laughter does indeed have the last laugh. Abraham is the father of multitudes – three major world religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity representing billions of believers – claim him as their father. The power of the cross, which was a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles is our power to look at death in the face and laugh. For our God has the last laugh. Through Jesus' death on a cross we triumph over death. Through his resurrection we are invited to live new and abundant lives. Who would believe that God's power is made perfect in weakness?

What audacious promise is God revealing to you and inviting you to believe at this time? Faith and laughter are closely related. The absurdity of God's grace, the humor of his story, the audaciousness of his promises invites our gaiety and laughter. It's OK to fall on the floor laughing. After all, God giving a baby son to Sarah at 90 and Abraham at 99 is pretty funny. But in the economy of God's grace laughter has the last laugh. And that's the rest of the story. **Amen.**