

"LOL" (Laugh Out Loud)

3 April 2005

Bible passages:

Genesis 17:17 (*The Message*)

Abraham fell flat on his face. And then he laughed, thinking, "Can a hundred-year-old man father a son? And can Sarah, at ninety years, have a baby?"

Genesis 21:5-6 (*The Message*)

Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born. Sarah said, "God has blessed me with laughter and all who get the news will laugh with me!"

Are you familiar with what the comedian George Burns said about a sermon? This is what he was quoted as saying: "A good sermon should have a good beginning and a good ending, and they should be as close together as possible."

I suppose if that's lacking, the story about the new pastor who arrived at her new church is appropriate. On her very first day in the office, she received a call from her predecessor. He congratulated her on being the new pastor there, and told her that in the center drawer of her desk, she would find three envelopes, all numbered, which she was to open in that order whenever she felt that she was in trouble with her congregation.

After a short-lived honeymoon period with the congregation, the pressure started to mount, and the pastor decided to open the first envelope. Her predecessor advised her, "Blame me for the problem. After all, I'm long gone and have problems of my own, and if it will help, point out my shortcomings as the reason things aren't working out so well."

That worked for a while, but then things turned sour again, so the pastor opened the second envelope. It read, "Blame the denomination. They're big and rich and they can take it."

That worked quite well for a while, but then the storm clouds really gathered again, and so in desperation, the pastor went to the drawer and opened the third envelope. It said, "Prepare three envelopes!"

If you haven't laughed at least once so far this morning at The Garden, you might as well chug your coffee and make an early exit. At least as far as my joke telling is

concerned, this is about as good as it gets! Maybe you're low of L.Q. today—laughter quotient--, but if that's the case, try to hang around and we'll see if we can remedy that.

If you've been on another planet so far today, and haven't figured it out yet, our title is "LOL" which stands for "laughing out loud." Our intention is for you to do just that. Someone may have a problem with that, I suppose, because, after all, this is church. If that's the case, I'm sorry, but I firmly believe that if there's anywhere laughter belongs, it's in church, especially after the hope, joy, new life and transformation that Easter offers us! And it certainly belongs here at The Garden! I believe that laughter is a sign of the presence of God, and that laughter is in fact a gift from God, a blessing from God.

That's precisely what our Bible passages are telling us. Let's take a look at them. First, we have the reaction of Abraham to his being informed that he was about to be a parent. Abraham fell flat on his face. And then he laughed, thinking, "**Can a hundred-year-old man father a son? And can Sarah, at ninety years, have a baby?**"

It's probably a good idea for me to fill in some of the middle part of the story to help us get the full impact. In another instance, Abraham once again receives the same information, but this time, Sarah was hiding outside the tent, and when she heard it, she laughed. One version of the Bible puts it like this: "**An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old man of a husband?**" Certainly the whole idea of this elderly couple having a baby was ludicrous, and virtually unbelievable! A baby? At their advanced ages? Even if it were physically possible, raising a child to adulthood had to seem impossible!

According to the Bible story, that's exactly what happened. Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and they named him Isaac. Tell me that God doesn't have a sense of humor, that God doesn't laugh! In Hebrew, the name Isaac means "he laughs."

All of this causes Sarah to make the exclamation that we find in our second Bible passage. "**God has blessed me with laughter and all who get the news will laugh with me!**" God has *blessed* me with *laughter* and everyone who hears about this will *laugh*. Why? Because that's one of the primary means God has given us to cope with those things that we can't comprehend or explain. Maybe, in Sarah's case, laughter was the way Sarah could deal with the situation. You know Bob Newhart once said, "**Laughter gives us distance. It allows us to step back from an event, deal with it and then move on.**"

Laughter is a wonderful gift from God, and frankly, I can't imagine a day without it. For many years, I've felt especially blessed to have a life partner in Mike, one who has a wonderful ability to make me laugh. Playing with our kitten always causes me to laugh. In addition, we've been fortunate to have some very special friends in our

lives, friends who seem to specialize in laughter. I look forward to spending time with all of them, because I feel energized by being around them. The days for me that don't seem to go very well are the days when, if I reflect on them, there has been little or no laughter.

One of the funniest times I can recall with laughter was at a women's retreat many years ago now. I had a colleague who was a good actress, and she demonstrated to the group just how a laugh looked when broken down into its various parts. It's reminiscent of what Robert Brody wrote in his 1983 article "Anatomy of a Laugh." He said, "Your mouth was twisted open, your tongue was stuck out halfway, your lips were pulled back and your nostrils were flared. Though you felt pleasure, your face suggested pain. Your cheeks turned red and you doubled over, gasping. Your stomach, chest and ribs ached. You were helpless, unable even to speak."

Laughter is the physiological response to humor, either something funny that's said, or to something that happens that is humorous or even ridiculous. Those who've studied laughter say that it's composed of two parts—a set of gestures such as we've just heard and the production of a sound. Clearly, everybody laughs differently. Some laugh long and loud; some laugh with a "ho-ho," others with a "ha-ha," some with a "hee-hee," and some with a "heh-heh."

Wouldn't it be fun to be a scientist who tries to figure out all this laughter business? There are some who do, and a theory about the origin of laughter was that it was a gesture of relief at escaping danger.

There are many, many benefits to laughter. For instance, laughter may indicate trust in our companions. Laughter breaks down the barriers between us, and serves to make and strengthen our connections with others. One cultural anthropologist was quoted as saying, "Laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. And the more laughter, the more bonding within the group." Clearly, laughter is contagious, because when we hear one or more laughing, it's hard not to at least smile along with them, even if we don't know why they're laughing.

In the late 1970's, Norman Cousins wrote a book entitled *Anatomy of an Illness*, in which he brought to light the healing power of laughter. I've kind of forgotten now the disease he had, but when he was in the hospital, he had all kinds of funny movies brought in to watch and laugh at. He was firmly convinced that laughter helped him heal from the disease.

Since his time, the acknowledgement that laughter is healing is widely shared. For some time, it's been well known that the ability to laugh is helpful to those coping with major illness and the stress of life's problems. But researchers are now saying that laughter can do a lot more. It can basically bring balance to all the components

of the immune system, which helps us fight off diseases.

It's been proven that laughter lowers blood pressure, and may even be good for the heart. In addition, there are psychological benefits to laughing. It is very cathartic in helping us release those pent-up emotions, like anger, sadness and fear. They can be released harmlessly and in a healing way.

We're also told that laughing is good exercise. If we laugh 100 times a day, that is equal to 10 minutes on the rowing machine or 15 minutes on an exercise bike, and I don't know about you, but I'll take laughing any time over those two! In other words, laughing can be a total body workout, or as Cousins said, "**Laughter is inner jogging.**" Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland put it another way, saying, "**Laughter is the most healthful exertion.**"

"**Laughter is part of the human survival kit,**" says David Nathan, and he's right on target with that. Laughter does indeed help us survive the ups and downs of life. In fact, last month, I happened to catch a clip on the news that showed a clown in Indonesia. He was trying to make both children and adults laugh, something that has been missing in their lives since the tsunami. He was trying to convey God's gift of laughter to those who had experienced such devastation, and help them move toward healing. That's what laughter can do.

There's no way we can say enough about the goodness of laughing. As Linda Knight once said, "**The best blush to use is laughter; it puts roses in your cheeks and in your soul.**" I think Sarah was right. God has given us the wonderful gift of laughter.

Closing:

I really like what e.e. cummings once wrote: "**The most wasted of all days is one without laughter.**" As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we don't spend any wasted days. Today and everyday, I hope you laugh, and laugh, and laugh some more.

Clown: "Peas be with you. Let's split."

Linda: Have a great day, and go in peace. Amen.