

## **HAVE YOU LAUGHED TODAY?**

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 and Psalm 126:1-6

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Carol Stepp, Youth Pastor

Ever heard of *Laughter Sunday* or *Holy Humor Sunday*? Well, on the Sunday after Easter many preachers preach about Doubting Thomas or Holy Humor, and I think I did a sermon on Doubting Thomas last year! So Today I'm going with "Holy Humor." The idea of setting aside one Sunday each year to celebrate God's gift of laughter and joy isn't new actually, it has a long and rich history in many congregations around the world.

Churches in 15<sup>th</sup> century Bavaria celebrated the Sunday after Easter and named it *Risus Paschalis*, which translates as "God's Joke Sunday." This was their way of celebrating the resurrection of Christ – **the supreme joke God played on Satan by raising Jesus from the dead.**

Priests would deliberately include amusing stories and jokes in their sermons to make the parishioners laugh. After two enjoying two centuries of Laughter Sunday, Pope Clement X saw that people were having too much fun, so he officially outlawed its observance in the 17<sup>th</sup> century! Well too bad! We raucous Presbyterians are still here cackling away four centuries later!

Remember, the Reader's Digest always said, "Laughter is the Best Medicine." If you think about it, laughter is the only medicine you can overdose on and it helps you live even better! Plus, it's fun, free, and easy to use.

So, each of you have a prescription card in your bulletin. I want you to take it out and place the mustache under your nose. Now turn to the person beside you and say, "***I mustache you a question.***" ***Now turn your card over and ask them your joke!*** Now, I (Carol Stepp) mustache you a question. ***Have you laughed today?***" ***Here is my joke...***

Knock, knock! *Who's there?* BEAR! *Bear who?* Bear with me, we aren't done yet!

Laughter and laughing mentioned in 48 times in the Bible. So, it's been around a long time. An easily recognized verse in the Bible is Ecclesiastes 3 verse 3, which says ***there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh;"*** this mention of laughter that never fails to bring a smile to my soul. *So, if you just stop and think, laughter is even biblical. And I say God approves!*

A laughable story is found in the book of Acts 20 verses 7-12.

*“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.”*

Don't worry; it has a happy ending. Paul found Eutychus and brought him back to life. But guess what? He resumed his preaching as if nothing happened and continued until daybreak! Moral of the story: pastors don't preach for too long; congregants just don't fall asleep in church! That's why I like to preach shorter sermons! Preaching too long can be lethal!

Another place to find laughter in the Bible is in Psalm 126 where the Israelites were released from Babylonian captivity during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. There's a jubilant song goes like this:

*Psalm 126*

1When the LORD restored the fortunes of<sup>[a]</sup> Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.<sup>[b]</sup>

2Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

3The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.

In an article called [“Laughter is the Best Medicine”](#) By Lawrence [Robinson](#), Melinda [Smith](#), M.A. and Jeanne [Segal](#), Ph.D., they reveal loads of interesting data. We know that it's fun to share a good laugh, but did you know it can actually improve your health? These three researchers say that laughter relaxes the whole body. A good, hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes after.

And here is another surprise, laughter protects the heart. It improves the function of blood vessels, which can help protect you against a heart attack! A bunch of us have heart conditions, so that's good to know!

Now, here's the best one I found: they say laughter burns calories. Okay, so it's no replacement for going to the gym or fat removal by laser, but one study found that

laughing for 10 to 15 minutes a day can burn approximately 40 calories - which could be enough to lose three or four pounds over the course of a year.

It's true: laughter is strong medicine. It draws people together in ways that trigger healthy physical and emotional changes in the body. Laughter strengthens your immune system, boosts mood, diminishes pain, and protects you from the damaging effects of stress. Nothing works faster or more dependably to bring your mind and body back into balance than a good laugh. Humor lightens your burdens, inspires hope, connects you to others, and keeps you grounded, focused, and alert. It also helps you release anger and forgive sooner and that's a one thing we are called to do as Christians, *FORGIVE*.

So, getting back to laughter being biblical, here are a couple of stories I am going to end with.

First of all, one would be remiss without mentioning old Abraham and Sarah's story of having a baby at 90 and 100! Here's the story, it starts in Genesis 17:15-17.

<sup>15</sup> God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her and also give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." <sup>17</sup> 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?"

And then it skips to Genesis 18:12 where Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my Lord being old also?" <sup>1</sup> Sarah's laughter was not a laughter of faith, but a laughter of doubting and distrust<sup>2</sup>. After God fulfilled his promise to Sarah, she said, "God has made me laugh. Everyone who hears will laugh with me"<sup>3</sup>.

God responded by asking Abraham about Sarah's laughter. And when Sarah denied that she had laughed because she was afraid, God forced her to confront the truth of her actions. But he did not punish her or retract his promise. God's grace was great enough, not only to do the impossible for Sarah, but also to accept her human limitations and forgive her unbelief. That's what's so amazing about grace...we can even laugh at God and not be struck dead!

In an article titled "**What Can We Learn from Sarah's Laughter in the Bible?**" by Rebecca, who doesn't give her last name, but the site is "outuponthewaters.com", Sarah is depicted as laughing with joy, the musical sound of her laughter ringing out through the camp, inspiring joy and wonder in others.

But the reality of Sarah's laughter is something quite different. After Isaac is born, Sarah does indeed laugh with joy, saying "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:5-6).

But before the birth of her son, before concrete proof of God's promise, Sarah's laughter is one of skepticism and doubt. She laughs because what God tells her seems impossible. I find this such a fascinating Bible story because it is so deep and profound and universal. For those of us who have been following God for any significant length of time, **why did Sarah laugh?**

So why did Sarah laugh? When we look at the passages from Scripture about Sarah's laughter, we see that Sarah laughed for two very different reasons at two very different times.

When God first promised that Sarah would have a child, Sarah was 90 years old. We can imagine that Abraham and Sarah had been trying to have children, likely for decades, and had also likely given up hope of ever having children. That period of resignation, of lost hope, had probably also lasted for decades. In this situation, can you imagine Sarah *not* laughing?

After all, she had been trying to have children for decades! Even praying to God for a son, enduring the cycle of hope and loss over and over and over again until she finally throws in the towel, finally gives up and says, "Okay, God, I guess you have different plans for me." Sarah, whose friends had been mother and mother, were all great-grandmothers at this point, of course she believed, with the overwhelming evidence to support her, that her child-bearing years were far behind her. Then Sarah was then told by God that she would bear a child. Who among us would not laugh?

So, when God promises Sarah a son, she laughs her head off: A son? You're kidding me! At my age? With my body worn and tired? There's no way! Sarah's laughter at the beginning of the promise is one of doubt and skepticism.

And yet, at the end of the story, when Sarah gives birth to Isaac (whose name means laughter), she laughs again. This time the laughter is not doubt but jubilation and awe! Sarah laughs with joy because God has fulfilled his promise, a promise that was so unbelievable at the beginning.

What did God say to Sarah after she laughed?

When Sarah laughed the first time, God questioned Abraham, saying “Why did Sarah laugh.... Is there anything too hard for the Lord?” It’s funny that the apostle Luke answers that question years later in Luke 1:37: <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Sarah, who was with Abraham, replies, saying that she did not laugh. And God said to her, simply: “Yes, you did laugh.” God responded by asking Abraham about Sarah's laughter. And when Sarah denied that she had laughed because she was afraid, God forced her to confront the truth of her actions. But he did not punish her or retract his promise. God's grace was great enough, not only to do the impossible for Sarah, but also to accept her human limitations and forgive her unbelief. That’s what’s so amazing about grace...we can even laugh at God! And he is ever true to us!

We are shown here that God’s reply is so simply and so caring. First, he asserts his power. He’s in charge of the whole show. Is there anything out of his reach? God reassures Abraham and Sarah that he is in control, and that nothing is impossible for him.

Next, God’s simple reply of “Yes, you did laugh,” reveals Sarah’s heart. God knows what is in Sarah’s heart. He knows her deepest fears and her deepest doubts. He doesn’t judge her for her doubts. He simply acknowledges them.

There are several things that We Can Learn from Sarah’s Laughter in the Bible. God’s plan is bigger than our plans. Sarah’s plan was probably to ride out old age with whatever other plans God had for her. Maybe she took some joy in the children around her. She certainly didn’t plan on becoming a mother to many nations. And yet, God’s plan for Sarah was so much bigger than her own plans for herself.

This is often the case for ourselves, as well. When faced with a plan that is so much bigger, or so much different, than what we have in mind, we might respond like Sarah with doubt and laughter. And that is because we can only see a small piece of the puzzle. We think that we know the plan, and we try our very best to be in the driver’s seat, and yet God so often blows up our plans and leads us somewhere we never would have expected or believed to go. Like when I lost my job and went to seminary, that’s definitely laughable! Has God ever exploded expectations for you like that? I bet some of you can tell similar stories!

Many theologians think the reason Sarah laughed in this Bible story was to show God’s mercy: God was merciful to Sarah, since he didn’t punish her for the sin of disbelief. And it’s true that God is merciful. God had mercy on Sarah, not just in overlooking her doubt and disbelief, but also in giving her a son.

Can you relate to Sarah's story? A story of promise in the midst of hardship? Sarah laughed because she just couldn't believe that things would be any different *this* time, that after years and years of failure, this time would be any different.

And it's the same for us, too, isn't it? Hardship wears us down, whether it is a struggle with fertility, or finances, or career, or relationships, or anything else. We try, and we try, and we try, thinking that we are the author of our own story, and finally perhaps we give up. A promise, in this situation, seems laughable.

And yet, Sarah's story reminds us that God's plans are greater than our plans. He is the one in the driver's seat. And surprise, things often will not go as we expect them to. We might react with doubt, and that's okay. Sarah may have thought that it wouldn't work. She may have doubted the whole time. But guess what? She still listened.

So maybe, when we follow God, and we surrender our will and our plans to God, wonder and joy will follow, if we just wait for it. It will probably look vastly different than what we expected. But it can result, in some capacity, into something joyful!

Never fear! Laughter when it's doubt can turn into the laughter of joy. We are shown this when Sarah gives up control and learns to trust God. Laughter is our birthright. Trust in God wants us to enjoy life, both lives now and the time to come.

May we remember that in the weeks to come! **Amen.**