

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 18, 2017

"LOL"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7 ~ Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

The call came early in the afternoon ... Mrs. Clark had died, after a long battle with cancer. Just a few weeks before I had begun serving the church in Nekoosa as a student pastor, along with a small old country church in Babcock, about 10 miles away. The church in Babcock had far more church members in the cemetery outside than in the sanctuary inside. I was in my second year at seminary and these were my first churches.

I was serious about my role. I was doing God's work. Everything had an ultimate significance to me. But I was scared. This would be my first funeral, though I was hoping ... you might even say praying ... that they might have some other pastor in mind who had a little more experience ... a little more training. Believe me I was scared.

I drove over to Babcock that afternoon to visit with poor Mr. Clark. That's all anybody ever called him, Mr. Clark. I think his first name might have been Methuselah. He was older than dust and feeble and frail, and I was such a newbie. It was a late life marriage for both of them, after losing mates of many years. Everybody thought they were good for each other ... well except maybe their children. They lived in a double wide trailer off the main road, and when I pulled into the driveway, I could see the family was already gathering from the four winds. There were two pickups and a station wagon alongside Mr. Clark's old Ford.

I took a deep breath, and I went to the door to make my first pastoral grief call. Have I mentioned how scared I was? None of the classes I had taken had covered this yet. I could exegete a passage of scripture with the best of them, but I didn't know the right words for this. I didn't have the proven formula. I didn't know the perfect scriptures to read at a time like this that would take away his pain. I didn't even know yet there *aren't* any right words, proven formulas, or perfect scriptures at a time like this. I knocked on the door and a woman in her early thirties let me in. The place was bedlam, with a measure of chaos thrown in.

The counter was already covered with the casseroles their neighbors had made, two or three kinds of pie, dirty dishes sitting everywhere. Four adults sat at the small dining table playing cards. They were laughing and shouting at each other, having a fine old time. They hardly noticed when I came in. There were four or five ... seemed more like forty or fifty ... children running from room to room, laughing and crying, playing chase, rolling around on the floor like puppies. They were all Mrs. Clark's family, her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And they were laughing. Laughing! How could they laugh at a time like this? And there sat poor Mr. Clark alone and unattended in a chair by the window, his eyes red and hollowed from crying. My anxiety turned to anger, but I didn't say a word.

I pulled Mr. Clark back to the only empty room where we could just barely hear one another over the din. We talked for about twenty minutes and we prayed. Neither my words nor my prayer seemed to make a dent in his sorrow. I felt so useless. I guess I did okay, but frankly, I was just glad to get out of there. But as I was saying goodbye and heading for the door, another couple arrived ... another of her sons and his wife. She slipped by, but he stopped to shake my hand. He was about sixty, about five feet tall, four feet wide, built like a fire plug.

"You the preacher?" he asked me. "Uh, yeah?" I answered, almost as if I couldn't believe it myself. "I got a question for you," he said. My heart was in my throat. "O, no!" I thought. "He's going to ask me, 'Why does God let good people die?' He's going to ask me, 'Why did my Momma have to suffer?' He's going to ask me, 'Where is my Momma right now?'"

"Where's the first baseball game in the Bible?" he asked, as serious as a soldier. "Uh, I don't know," I mumbled. "You *are* the preacher, aren't you?" "Uh-huh." "It's in Genesis One: 'In the Big Inning'." Everybody laughed, but I wasn't laughing. "Where's the first track meet in the Bible?" he followed. "I have no idea," I answered, praying that God would deliver me from this kook before I fainted. "You don't know?" he protested. "You're the preacher and you haven't even read the Bible? It says, 'Peter and John raced to the tomb'." Everybody laughed, but I wasn't laughing. I was starting to get angrier. I just didn't understand how they could be laughing at a time like this.

All this while he's standing in the door and I'm trying to get away. I'm desperate for an exit strategy. I'm thinking about jumping out of the window but I was stuck. His next question caught me completely off guard. "Ever felt an ear with muscles?" "Huh?" "An ear with muscles!" "Uh, not that I recall." "Feel this ear!" he demanded and grabbed my hand so I could feel his ear. It was hard and leathery, about half an inch thick. It was gross. I was disgusted and I'm sure my face showed it. He explained he had been a professional wrestler for years, and he had what they call "cauliflower ear." "Now feel this ear!" he commanded. In my head I was begging God for release: "How long, O Lord? When will this ordeal be over?" He reached out and grabbed my hand again, only this time he ducked and growled: "ARRRGH!" and jumped up to smother me in a bear hug. And now everybody was LOL - laughing out loud. I looked over, and poor Mr. Clark was leaning against the chair giggling so hard he was crying.

It was the best medicine he could have had. It was release and relief and hope and life going on. It turned out that this Neanderthal Hulk Hogan had helped Mr. Clark in ways my oh-so-serious words never could.

Two qualities characterize our scripture reading today about Abraham and Sarah. Two words you seldom hear from a preacher about faith. Two words we don't teach our youth enough as decidedly Christian virtues. The two words are "laughter" and "imagination."

Laughter is all over this story. Poor old Abraham, poor old Sarah. God has sent them on a wild goose chase. Promised them land, but they have no land. Promised them descendants, but they have no children. Promised them blessing, but they feel cursed. And it's too late now. He's a hundred years old and she's ninety. What's left for them now? They have lots of memories, but what can they look forward to? Abraham feels cheated, like he's been sold a portfolio of penny

stocks. He complains about this to God. And what does God do? God makes another promise. "Sarah's gonna have a baby, Abraham!" Can you imagine that? In chapter 17, Abraham falls on his face laughing.

Three strangers drop by their tent in the wilderness. Abraham welcomes them like long lost kin. What a contrast to the reception they get at Sodom and Gomorrah when they go to visit Lot ... and those two cities pay dearly for their rejection and violence towards strangers. They just drop by, and Abraham acts like it's Sunday dinner. Can you imagine that?

One of the strangers says, "Abraham, your wife is a fine cook." "Well, she's a fine woman. She's stuck with me in spite of all our disappointments" Abraham says. Sarah's listening to all this behind the tent flap. She's eavesdropping. "When I get back this way," the Stranger says in a voice a little louder than he needs to be heard and with his head cocked towards the tent, "you and Sarah will be changing your baby's diapers." Sarah laughs out loud ... a surprised, amazed, incredulous, spontaneous cackle. She just can't help it.

"Why is Sarah laughing?" says the Lord. "Doesn't she believe me? Sure it's impossible, too good to be true, but is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Sarah, scared, denies it, but the stranger says, "No, we heard you. You were laughing." Okay, it's possible her laughter and Abraham's before was the ironic, sardonic, maybe even the cynical laughter of their deep disappointment. But not long afterwards, just a few chapters later, Sarah has a baby boy ... the first miraculous birth in a book of miraculous births. And they name their boy "Isaac," which in Hebrew means "laughter." Sarah goes on to say in chapter 21, "*God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me*" (Gen 21:6). This is the laughter of joy and gratitude, of those whose prayers have been answered ... the free laughter of the saved. Can you imagine that? It's a funny story, and of course, a royal joke on Abraham and Sarah. God gets the last laugh. God always does.

Sometimes we just take things too seriously in the church. I'm guilty of that myself. We take church too seriously. We take life too seriously. We take ourselves too seriously, which is why God gives us partners and children and friends, who know better and remind us. We're so serious, but God is laughing and wants us to laugh too. I know there are times when laughter is impossible and inappropriate. God doesn't laugh at injustice. God doesn't smile at sorrow. God doesn't think our suffering is a joke. As Ecclesiastes says, there is "*a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance*" (Eccles. 3:4). But too often I think we weep when we ought to be laughing, and we mourn when we ought to be dancing. Or maybe we should do them all at the same time.

How can we laugh at a time like this? How can we laugh in a world like this? Precisely because we know God has the last laugh. God always does. The promises of God will not be broken ... and God has promised us some wonderful things. There are lots of good surprises along the way, too. We can laugh in the face of sorrow because we know by the grace of God, that it won't always be this way. We can laugh in the face of injustice because we know by the promise of God that justice will ultimately be done. We can laugh in the face of death because we know by the grace of God that Christ has prepared a place for us. Our laughter is an act of faith in God's promise ... an act of defiance in the face of evil ... an act of response to the surprising Stranger

who brings us good news ... that the impossible is about to happen. Our laughter helps us not to take ourselves too seriously ... lest we forget that we're not God. And our laughter expresses our trust in what a good God might yet do. Someone once said, "the opera ain't over `til the fat lady sings." But I'm here to tell you, the story ain't over `til the loving God laughs.

"Is anything too wonderful for God?" asks the Stranger. It makes you think, doesn't it? It makes you imagine. It makes me wonder what wonderful things God may be wanting to bring to miraculous birth among us ... things we might think impossible now ... dreams just too good to be true. That's the other thing we don't do enough of in our lives ... imagine. We sometimes discourage the chaos of imagination and creativity and possibility. Oh, we're pretty good at imagining disaster ... at seeing the worst case scenario ... at dreaming bad dreams. It seems that we can always imagine the reasons why something is impossible. But what about dreaming good dreams? What about imagining the good? What about asking ourselves "Is anything too wonderful for God?"

Fred Craddock tells the story of lying in his yard one night with his dad when he was a child and munching on the grass, gazing at the glory of the stars. This was back in the days before we all hovered like moths around the ghostly glow of 137 cable channels. His dad said to him, "Son, how far can you think?" He said, "What?" "How far can you think?" "Well, I don't know what you mean." "Just think as far as you can up towards those stars." He squinted his eyes, geared up his imagination, and said, "I'm thinking... I'm thinking... I'm thinking..." His dad said, "Think as far as you can think." "OK, I am, I'm thinking as far as I can think." "Well, drive down a stake out there now," his dad said. "In your mind, drive down a stake. Have you driven down the stake? That's as far as you can think?" "Yes sir." His dad said, "Now what's on the other side of your stake?" He said, "Well, there's more sky." "Then move your stake," his dad said. "Move your stake." And they spent the evening moving his stake out there among the stars. Says Craddock, "It was a crazy thing to do, but I will never thank him enough for doing it."

That's what God said to Abraham and Sarah, who had their stake set too close ... set in concrete ... set in stone. "Move your stake. How far can you think? There's more sky. Is anything too wonderful for God?"

Funny, isn't it? I mean, you have to laugh. A post-menopausal woman has a giggly baby boy. A bunch of slaves are freed from an empire and become a people. A Stranger from Nazareth who claims God loves everybody gets himself killed for saying it, but then God raises him from the dead so he can say it again ... say it forever. Can you imagine that? Isn't that funny? Isn't that hilarious? Is anything too wonderful for God?

May we pray?

Teach us how to laugh the laughter of faith, Lord, the free and flowing joy of those who know you will have the last laugh ... and that your promises will all be fulfilled. Lead us your church to pull up our stakes of "can't" and "never" ... to think as far as you think ... until the impossible becomes possible ... until the improbable becomes commonplace ... until your best dream becomes reality ... and we are doubled over with joy in Jesus' name. Amen.