

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 2, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:
2017 Summer Series

Laughing at God's Plans

Sermon on Genesis 18:1-15 (6/24 & 6/25/17)
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Almighty God, take our minds and think through them...take our mouths and speak through them...take our hands and work through them...take our hearts and set them on fire for you; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

There is an old Jewish proverb that says something like, "We plan, God laughs." You have perhaps heard writer and actor Woody Allen's contemporary rendering of this proverb: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

I imagine many of us in this room could easily think of times when our own plans fell apart because some other plan crashed into *our* plan. It may have been something as simple as your evening out falling apart because of sick children or a work emergency... or it may have been something as complex as a painful diagnosis that changed the course of *your* life or that changed the course of a loved one's life.

When I was a child, I always had a plan for what I wanted to be when I grew-up. That plan *changed* about every two years, but I always had a plan! First, I wanted to be a nurse, then a doctor, then a physical therapist... then I changed course rather drastically toward teaching, teaching music or teaching elementary school.

In middle school, a leader at my home church once asked me if I'd ever thought about becoming a pastor. I didn't know just where exactly pastors came from, but I was quite sure pastoral ministry was not for me. At the ripe old age of 12, *I* had other plans for my life.

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

In his sermon last weekend – the first sermon in this summertime *Ghost Stories* series – Pastor Mark shared just a bit about his own life plans.

Plans that *also* did not include pastoral ministry – at least not at first. Two weeks ago, we here at McCabe got to help celebrate Pastor Mark's ordination, a milestone event for us pastors. And, in his sermon last week, he mentioned that God's plan for him to become a pastor turned his life rather upside-down.

“If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.”

Career and vocational plans being shifted mid-course always make life feel upside-down... especially since shifts in those types of plans often mean a change in income level, schooling needs, and, *very* often, a change in geographical location. And, of course, when our plans change, depending on our household situation, the plans of *others* may automatically change as well. *Our* plans are so rarely only about *us*.

That famous phrase – *“If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans”* – that famous phrase is an invitation to hold plans loosely. It's an invitation to remember that *we* do not see our lives as fully as God sees our lives. It's an invitation to be attentive to the Spirit's leading.

And, when we allow ourselves to be led by God's Spirit – when we allow ourselves to be led by the great, Holy Ghost – our plans will fall in line with God's plans.

Now, you know that phrase *“If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.”* I've said it about a million times in just a few short minutes. If you weren't familiar with this phrase before, surely you are now.

Well, as I thought about the Scripture reading for this weekend's message, I couldn't help but think about that phrase. However, that phrase doesn't exactly fit with today's reading. In fact, today's reading is somewhat *opposite*.

Because, in today's reading, we don't find God laughing at human plans... rather, we find *humans* laughing at God's plans. And, in the particular circumstances of the human laughter within today's Scripture reading, I suspect most of us would sympathize. But we'll get to that story in a bit...

As I mentioned a moment ago, we are newly into our summer-long sermon series called *Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions and Divine Encounters*. During this series, we'll highlight a dozen, or so, biblical stories during which God was particularly present to someone – either by mysterious presence or through a mysterious vision.

Last weekend, we began this series, appropriately, with a focus on God's mysterious presence *in the beginning*. Pastor Mark preached about how, in the beginning, Creation was rather formless, directionless... *but*. But God's Holy Spirit was moving over the waters of Creation – that The Holy Ghost was moving over the water, animating life, breathing divine breath, inspiring a whole lot of nothing to become a whole lot of *something*.

Though I wasn't here last weekend to hear Pastor Mark's sermon first-hand, I was blessed to be able to listen to it through our McCabe website and I absolutely love how he reminded us that – and I quote –

*“the same Spirit that breathed the breath of life into the first man and woman, the same Spirit that rose Jesus from the dead, the same Spirit that meets us right here in worship this morning” ... “this is the same Spirit that lives in you and me!”*¹

Isn't that a powerful reminder – this reminder that the Spirit who breathed over the waters of Creation is the *same* Holy Spirit who blesses us today? The same Holy Ghost who gives us visions and who is mysteriously present among us throughout life? Isn't it powerful to remember that's the same Spirit who helped breathe Creation into being?

¹ The Spirit of God Is..., Pastor Mark Ehrmantraut, June 18 at 10:00 am service, McCabe United Methodist Church, Bismarck, ND, www.mccabeum@mccabeumc.com subpage “messages”, page 4 of printed sermon.

The same Holy Spirit who breathed life into Creation is the Spirit who was uniquely present to each of the courageous McCabe men and women who are sharing their testimonies with us each week of this series.

See, God's Spirit has been up to something powerful and creative and marvelous and mysterious since the beginning of all time... and if I were to assign some words to describe how God so often works, those are definitely some of the words I would assign: *powerful... creative... marvelous... mysterious.*

And when those words are at work – when the words “powerful,” “creative,” “marvelous,” and “mysterious” are at work – our plans can change on a dime.

Take Abraham and Sarah, for example. We meet them in chapter 11 of Genesis... and early on in their story – in chapter 12 – God initiates a special relationship with Abraham that changes everything. God initiates a relationship that Abraham then reciprocates: Abraham commits – he *chooses* – to be in relationship with God.

Then, in chapter 12 of Genesis, God makes an extremely important, three-fold promise to Abraham: God promises Abraham land, descendants, and blessing – that Abraham and his descendants will *be* blessed by God and that Abraham and his descendants would *be a blessing* to the world.

Land. Descendants. Blessing. Those were the three things God promised Abraham when they entered into their special relationship.

And, frankly, the most important part of the three-fold promise was the descendants part... because, let's be honest, receiving a big piece of land, and trying to bless the whole world, would be rather pointless for Abraham and Sarah alone.

The whole three-fold promise hinged on Abraham and Sarah having descendants. Yet, in the same breath that Sarah is introduced as Abraham's wife in Genesis chapter 11, we learn that she is barren... that she cannot have children. Abraham changes his life plans to worship the Lord God, God, then, makes a plan for Abraham, and then that plan seems quite impossible.

What a holy, and whol-ly *painful*, dilemma.

God promised descendants to a man whose wife was barren. If you're infertile, how in the world do you build a line of descendants that will bless the whole world? Well, if you're Abraham and Sarah – and month after month, year after year, you're reminded of your infertility – if you're Abraham and Sarah, you make an alternate plan to fulfill *God's* plan.

So, Sarah proposed the idea of seeing if Abraham could conceive a child with her servant, Hagar... and, though there are few details of this conversation in the biblical text, Abraham seems not to have hesitated over this alternate plan to create some descendants.

As the story goes, Hagar conceives and bears a son named Ishmael. Abraham is thrilled! Sarah, however, is less thrilled. Instead of being pleased that her plan worked, she becomes envious of Hagar's fertility. And, eventually, Hagar and Ishmael are cast out of the household. (As you might imagine, there's a lot more to that story... but, for today, our focus is on Abraham and *Sarah* – not on Hagar and Ishmael.)

So, the stage that is set for today's reading from Genesis chapter 18 is a stage on which Sarah's infertility is abundantly clear. She's old, she's past normal child-bearing years, and, *during* her child-bearing years, she was never able to bear children.

Enter the three holy, mysterious visitors who showed-up when Abraham's tents were pitched near the sacred trees at Mamre.

When the visitors arrived, Abraham immediately had the sense they were holy and important – that, somehow, through these three visitors, the Lord himself was visiting. So Abraham bowed his face to them and offered the best hospitality he could think to offer: water to wash their feet, the shady comfort of the large tree, and food for nourishment.

Abraham popped-into the tent to ask Sarah to bake up some bread and he chose one of his best calves to have a servant slaughter and prepare as a

meal for the mysterious guests. Now, hear again the last portion of the story... starting at verse eight of Genesis 18:

“While they were eating, [Abraham] stood near [the visitors] under the trees, and they asked, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' 'She is right there in the tent,' Abraham answered. One of the guests was the Lord, and he said, 'I'll come back about this time next year, and when I do, Sarah will already have a son.'

“Sarah was behind Abraham, listening at the entrance to the tent. Abraham and Sarah were very old,

“and Sarah was well past the age for having children. So she laughed and said to herself, 'Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, will I really know such happiness?’

“The Lord asked Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh? Does she doubt that she can have a child in her old age? I am the Lord! There is nothing too difficult for me. I'll come back next year at the time I promised, and Sarah will already have a son.'

“Sarah was so frightened that she lied and said, 'I didn't laugh.' 'Yes, you did!' [the Lord] answered.”

What if God had told you about a plan – a plan you loved and cherished, a plan you hoped against hope would come true – what if God had told you about a plan... and, decades later, that plan still had not come true? Would you begin to doubt God's plan? Would you begin to wonder if you'd misunderstood the plan?

Then, what if you also knew God's plan was no longer naturally possible? What if you had hoped and prayed, month after month, year after year, that God's plan would finally become reality... yet, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, God's plan seemed to fail? Would you doubt God's plan? Would your heart perhaps even become hardened toward God's plan?

And, then... if you overheard a stranger say this plan was still going to come true – despite years of hope and heartbreak, despite your keen awareness that the plan was no longer naturally possible – if you overheard a stranger say this plan was still going to come true, you might laugh, right? And, if you laughed, it probably wouldn't be a joyful laugh... but, rather, a laugh tinged with far more bitter than sweet.

People of faith have sometimes told Sarah's story as though she simply lacked trust in God's promise. I don't think that's a fair assessment of Sarah. Anyone who has lived with the painful reality of infertility will find an abundance of sympathy for Sarah. And they will understand why she laughed.

“If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.”

But what about those times you're confident God has a plan for you – and that plan just doesn't come to fruition? Who gets to laugh then?

For as long as I can remember, I planned to be a wife and mother. I didn't always pursue this plan in the best of ways, and, year after year, Mr. Right failed to come along... but the plan persisted. Yet, as time went by, I began to set pieces of the plan aside. I began to ask myself, “Will I be okay if I never get married? Will I be at peace if I never have children?”

Well, nearly three years ago, pieces of my plan began falling into place when I met my Mr. Right. A year-and-a-half ago, we got married and we couldn't be happier about that. We're now at a place where we'd love to be expecting a child... but, that hasn't happened yet, and we're not naïve enough to assume it *will* happen just because we hope it will.

We all have plans for our lives, plans for our community, plans for our country, plans for our world, plans for this *church*. We all have plans about lots of things... but most of us have had plans fall apart. And, sometimes, when those plans have fallen apart, we've laughed Sarah's laugh: a laugh more bitter than sweet.

Yet, as trite as it may seem, so often when our dearest plans fall apart, some other plan emerges we never could have imagined: another plan that's more beautiful than the previous plan, or that inspires strength or courage we didn't know we had. When that happens, sometimes we can't help but laugh.

Last weekend, my husband and I went to the wedding of a friend in Pierre, South Dakota. While we were there, we got to meet the sweet baby of some friends of mine who had struggled with infertility for years before finally getting pregnant. And, a few days ago, I saw a post on Facebook from a colleague in another state; he and his wife are expecting their first child after three painful years of infertility.

Of course, Sarah's story – and these stories – are not the stories of everyone who's ever lived with infertility. Some children are never conceived. Some adoptions fall through. Many couples remain childless... and not by choice. Not every story has a miraculously joyful ending. Yet.

Yet... sometimes laughter comes to us as a gift in the midst of plans that have fallen apart. Perhaps that's why, when they did finally have a son, Abraham and Sarah named him "Isaac". See, in Hebrew, the name "Isaac" literally means *laughter*. Isaac was Abraham and Sarah's gift from God in the midst of plans they thought had fallen apart. Isaac, whose name means "laughter," was Abraham and Sarah's blessing that would help bless the world.

So often laughter is itself a holy visitor; a gift of joy in the midst of pain, a blessed release in the midst of struggle. And, when plans have fallen apart, when the barren seems like it will never bear fruit, every moment of laughter and joy is blessing from God – when plans fall apart, every moment of laughter and joy is a Ghost story moment... a divine visitation... a holy vision of something beautiful... a sign that a new plan is breaking forth. This is how our God works. Powerfully. Marvelously. Mysteriously.

Our God specializes in creating something out of nothing – bringing resurrection out of death, joy out of pain, blessing out of struggle. This is how our God works and this is our God's plan for us.

Because we are children of that Abrahamic promise: Jesus Christ himself came through Abraham and Sarah's family line and, as Jesus' followers today, we are blessed by God to bring blessing to the world. *That* is our ultimate plan. And *that* is our good news. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Holy and blessed God, thank you for being a God who makes and keeps promises. Thank you for promising to bless us that we might be a blessing for the world – a blessing for the whole, wide world, and a blessing for those situated near us. Thank you for your constant presence in the midst of life's barrenness...and, most especially, thank you for moments of joy and laughter that remind us of your Holy Ghost presence. Keep us attentive to you always; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.