

A-Proper 6, 2008
St. Luke's, Renton, WA
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Genesis 18.1-15

They say that laughter is the best medicine. And if that's true, then Sarah, whom we met in our first reading from Genesis ... if laughter is the best medicine, then Sarah is a veritable pharmacy. Her story has carried a smile through the ages of ages. You'll remember my mentioning last Sunday that, according to the tale, Abram was 99 years old before God changed his name to Abraham meaning "the father of many nations." And this is the beginning of Abraham and Sarah's nation-building. Abraham was 100 years old when the rather surprised couple began a family, well after the time in their lives to start looking for a home near a school.

Sarah laughed to herself (she may have tried to deny it, but you know she did!). Sarah laughed to herself at the notion that God would give her a child. "What, after I have grown old and (more to the point) after my husband has grown old, shall I have pleasure?" Sarah laughed at the thought of it. And Sarah laughed out loud and kept on laughing, she invited others into her laughter at the coming to be of this outrageous conception.

It's a story, of course, both about trusting God to bring God's promised work to pass and it's a story about the scandalous possibility that God would upend our lives with joy. It's a good story to have as a part of one's religion.

My question is: Can you conceive of such laughter? Can you conceive of such laughter? And I suppose the questions behind that question are: Do you trust God to bring about God's work in you? What would it mean to live your life with the possibility of God upending your life with joy? And don't any of you tell me that you're life's nearly over and you are past this conversation. That's what Sarah thought!!

The same questions work for our gospel lesson because it is a story about Jesus sending out his disciples with his great good news—the good news that "the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew says "kingdom of Heaven", the other gospels say "kingdom of God". Same thing either way, it's about God's reign *in the world* where and when the sick are made well, the dispirited are encouraged, the hapless are helped and there is justice, there is peace, we don't study war no more, and all God's children can laugh. The kingdom of heaven has come near. Can you conceive of it? What would it mean to live your life with the possibility of God upending the world creating a kingdom of God's joy?

You should have seen her face. You should have seen Maya Angelou's face when she was being interviewed recently on the cusp of the decision of who the next Democratic candidate for president would be. Maya Angelou is that wonderful African-American poet, educator, and civil rights leader, now nearly as old as Sarah was then. President Carter invited her to serve on the commission for the International Year of the Woman and President Clinton invited her to read her poetry at his inauguration. You should have seen her face when she considered the prospects of the first woman or the first African-American for president. You should have seen her face, beaming with joy.

Maya Angelou, after growing up an African-American in Arkansas, was pregnant at 16 years old, then used every gift she had to make a better world despite terrible odds. She worked closely with Malcolm X until his assassination and then with Martin Luther King, Jr. until he was

assassinated on her birthday. She continued the civil rights struggle and through her writing and poetry and grace has become an elder-states-woman of the struggle for a new world. Maya Angelou's life has always been about inspiring people to follow their heart, to do the right thing, and to give back from all that has been given to them. And to see her face beaming at the prospect of a woman or a Black man for president was a beautiful sight. It was a face that had God's reign in it. You could see she knew about the possibility that God would create of her life a joy and that she was laughing now after so many years weeping. She once said, "women should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible and live long lives."

If the kingdom of heaven isn't near, then it can't come to be. But it is near, says Jesus. It is near. So can you conceive of the possibility that your world will turn to joy? That God will have God's way with you and the hills will ring with your laughter? That God will touch you and you will be made whole. That God forgives you and you may now hold your head high. That God loves you and you are free to be loveable. The kingdom of heaven is near and there's a whole new world of possibilities.

My problem is with the details. I want to know where, when, how, and especially what God is going to do and I want specifics. I want to know, you know, so I can make some plans, be ready, and have something concrete to look forward to.

However, I can attest that even in my short life, this is not how it works. Most of what I have longed for and received has come in unexpected packages. And most of the really good stuff I seek sits on the other side of my complete metamorphosis—my utter transformation.

One of the most prominent Hebrew bible scholars of our day, Walter Bruggemann, a man deeply steeped in the stories and poetry of the bible and conscious of the world in which he lives, is fond of making this quite arresting statement. He says, "The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you, by the grace of God."

I need to write that down and stick it somewhere where I'll see it every day. I truly believe that the up-ending factor is innate to the coming of the kingdom of God. Oh you're going to get it, but not in the way for which you have been carefully prepared. The coming of this kingdom, so near and so dear, is going to come at the cost of our certitude. It will probably demand from us some comforts. It will surely alter the way we see the world now. And it will happen by the grace of God. Not by the meanness of God, not by the "gotcha" of God. No, by the merciful grace of God.

My growing sense is that the spiritual journey into Christ and the kingdom is that the pathway becomes less and less sure and we'll need to be led by another compass than that of our expectations. What we become attached to may well lead us astray. Going deep in the journey will mean finding the heart of God in our own hearts where we are utterly like the Christ and yet remain our own selves. We weep over what we're losing and we laugh at our gaining until we can laugh at both our letting go and at our gain. And Maya Angelou says, "I hope I laugh more than I cry."

Can you conceive of such laughter? What would it mean for your life to be upended in joy?

You know in the interview with the beaming and beatific and beatified Maya Angelou, she came out strongly for Clinton. And even what she planned and prepared for was taken away. But I doubt it altered her countenance, but only forced her to explore a new part of her heart. And I'm sure she's gotten a good laugh out of that.



"The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you, by the grace of God." And, "the kingdom of heaven is very near." You are being up-ended for joy. Can you conceive of the laughter? Can you hear it, even now, ringing in the hills?