

(Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17 NRSV)

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

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

Copyright © 2000 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

A Good Laugh in the Desert

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: March 19, 2000

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17

Over the last few weeks we've learned about things that don't work very well. Surprising things. Things we thought might work. Things that seemed like they ought to work. But things, we're told which don't work.

That's the job of religion, you know. My mother was a very good teacher of the religion of things that don't work. God, she told me, would know if I smoked cigarettes, if I goofed off in school, or if I made-out with my girlfriend. All things I thought held great promise for happiness, my mother assured me they would, everyone of them, lead to a grim end at God's righteous hand. God had a long list of the things I shouldn't do, including smoking, goofing off and necking, and God was watching me carefully and making check marks on the list any time I strayed from the course. I was struck, even as a youngster, at how much God seemed to think like my mother, but then I assumed they had been talking together for a long time.

Although I was sure it would never happen, I found myself telling my own children some similar things. I probably didn't tell them as much that God was watching. But I found that saying 'no', or 'don't do that', are the stock and trade of parenting.

Now one can make a good case that the religion of our adulthood should in many ways look a good deal different from the religion of our childhood. But like they say, the difference between a boy and a man may be that the man's toys are just bigger.

So, when we look at the stories of Jesus and his disciples, in some ways it's true enough that they are just big kids. In the stories in the Gospels we get the idea that the disciples joined up with Jesus because they thought he would get them the things they wanted, and that those things would make them happy. You recall that the disciples in Mark were sure that Jesus would be some kind of a national hero or military victor, and that they would be delivered from under the thumb of Rome. When he told them that, instead, he would be reviled, arrested and executed, they cried out in disbelief. And Jesus, in the strongest terms possible – get behind me Satan – told Peter, No. No, don't look for a worldly victory. That's not God's way but Satan's way.

Copyright © 2000 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Last week we read of how Satan tempted Jesus in the desert. Jesus was, of course, able to resist Satan's wares, but those wares were just bigger versions of what my mother warned me about when I was a child. Satan tempted Jesus with wealth and security. Satan tempted Jesus with great power in the world. Satan tempted Jesus with pride and showing off.

Why did Satan choose these temptations. Satan chose them because they are among the most reliable Satan has to offer. These, and a few others like them, have worked dependably for Satan. Throughout history people have been and continue to be convinced that power, wealth, security, praise, pleasure and the like are all you need in life for happiness and fulfillment. But Jesus tries to make it clear to all who will listen that, no, these things are not the building blocks of well-being. Even his own disciples failed to listen until after the damage was done.

Over these last weeks we've learned about the things that don't work in life. And they are surprising things. Because they are the things that we almost all of us, if we are honest, believe will work. Like I was as a child, we need someone like my mother telling us over and over again that these things are no good for us. I don't think we like to hear it very much, but in our hearts we know it's good advice. It's not just that God is watching; it's that even if God weren't watching, these things don't fulfill us or make us happy. Jesus knew that we could chase after them endlessly, and in the end it would be a huge waste of our time.

*** I recall at a certain point rebelling against my mother's list of things that weren't allowed. In frustration one day I told her that I was sure there were far more possibilities for freedom in Russia than there were in our house. The look on her face made it clear that she was ready to send me there to find out.

As I look back on that outburst of frustration, I think I may have been saying, Alright, already, I get it that you think necking and goofing off in school aren't any good, but I don't see mowing the lawn and weeding the garden turning me into an ecstatic fool either. I think I may have been wanting my mother to tell me the answer to this: Okay, I get it, there's a lot of stuff you shouldn't do, but how do you make life work? How do you find happiness or contentment? How do you find meaning in your life?

Of course, she was probably trying to tell me, but I wasn't listening. I suppose that in the back of my mind I was pretty sure that necking and goofing off in school would make me happy. Consequently, I experienced my mother's religious admonitions as rules, rules and more rules. At that stage in my life I wasn't open to the real possibilities that religious faith had for me.

If I were answering the questions that I probably wasn't really asking my mother – How do you make life work? How do you find contentment, fulfillment and meaning? – If I were answering those questions today, I would start with some things that are pretty obvious, things that I expect most of us don't quite believe on

Copyright © 2000 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

the one hand, and know in our heart of hearts on the other hand will give us well-being.

I would start with life's simple pleasures. We've all heard of stopping to smell the roses, but how many of us really do it? You don't necessarily have to even leave where you're at to do this. Some of it can happen right in the midst of your busy crazy life. How often do you stop to notice or smile at a co-worker in the middle of a crazy day? I think of our church. Sometimes the glitches, the challenges and the busyness seem to be the main story. Some of you, no doubt, get caught up in committee meetings, getting the article for the newsletter, dealing with the Sunday School program, being irritated with the way someone else behaves or wishing we didn't have to stretch our dollars so far. And these are part of the church. But so is the miracle that between those who came before us and our own efforts, not to mention God's blessing, we can come here to sing and pray, to experience the notes of the pipe organ and see the light refracted through the stained glass, to hear a word for today and sit quietly in a place where people have been listening to that word for nearly one hundred and fifty years. We can receive a gift of sacred space and we can receive the gift of how good our own efforts at generosity feel.

So, even in the midst of a cluttered world, there are simple and wonderful miracles, if we but stop to notice them. And then, of course, it is also good to get away from the pace of things. How often do we stop to experience the natural beauty of the day? A community garden, a hike in the woods, a drive into the country, each of them contains an infinity of miracles – leaves sprouting from seeds, blossoming and bearing fruit, the breeze blowing a million leaves in an intricate symphony, the sky a cosmic canvas for the paint of sun and clouds.

And there are even simpler things. Perhaps the simplest form of meditation is sitting quietly and paying attention to the coming and going of your breathing. How boring, you may think. And at first you are right. But in the end your breathing is nothing boring or to be taken for granted. There's the whole complex biochemistry of breathing in oxygen which nourishes the blood, which nourishes your organs, and on and on it goes. Suffice it to say, even without understanding it all, the human body is incredible. And so, in meditation, you notice, you pay attention to the fundamental occurrence of life – breathing.

Now, I don't want to lie to you. Paying attention to the simple things in life can change things. It can change you. The old ways may not be as satisfactory.

Some of you know Bobby Ives of the Carpenter's Boatshop in Pemaquid, Maine. Bobby is a minister who long ago opted for a ministry of building wooden boats and teaching troubled young people to build boats. But it's more than a trade. Every day there is worship. Every Saturday there is community work. But most important of all, there is an over-arching commitment to living simply, to using only

Copyright © 2000 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

the things they need, to saying No to grasping after the things Satan tempted Jesus with. There is a commitment to the beauty of a pine board, to its grain, to its fresh smell, to its possibility of being shaped into a boat of simply but astonishing beauty, which can skim the sea.

Their commitment to living simply is built on two profound understandings. First, wealth, power, prestige and the like aren't fulfilling, and the pursuit of them almost always makes us less fulfilled. Second, simplicity, awareness, noticing the world, holding it gently and attentively, appreciating God's gift of creation is fulfilling. It kindles our spirit. It warms our heart. It gives us life. Jesus tried to tell Peter that it would give him life even in the face of betrayal, rejection and death.

So all this takes a profoundly odd turn at the end. We've learned that grasping after the world's treasures doesn't work. We've learned that a simpler, more aware and more appreciative encounter with God's creation is a better idea. But there is some evidence that once you have said No to grasping after the world's treasures, they may, then, be yours. It can't help but make you laugh. Once the disciples came to grips with the reality that they couldn't have a political and military victory, once they came to grips with the reality that Jesus' ministry had ended in death, once they had gotten over their need to have him win and to have him be alive, then the irony swept in. Then they found they had Jesus, the living Christ, eternally, and they found that his victory was beyond measure.

Similarly, Sarah and Abraham had journeyed all their lives at God's command, following the promise that they would be the beginning of the chosen people. For a long time there was no child at all, and they moaned and groaned to God. Ultimately, Ishmael was born to Abraham and Hagar, at Sarah's directive. Now at old age, Sarah and Abraham have made peace with the situation. It wasn't the promise they had in mind, but it was good enough, and they had accepted it. Then at one hundred for Abraham and ninety for Sarah God says they will, in fact, have a son of their own. Abraham falls down laughing in the desert. Maybe he falls down laughing because it is too incredible that God would have them bear a child at this advanced age. But God does such incredible things, which is part of the point, and no doubt why we turn to God, even if, like Abraham, we suffer from some disbelief when God does act. But maybe Abraham also falls down laughing because they have spent all this life waiting and hoping on a child. Finally Abraham and Sarah make peace with the fact that it won't happen. And then, only then, when they no longer need a child, they find they will have one. Abraham knows the joke's on him. He can have what he wants as long as he doesn't want it too bad. Abraham and Sarah have a child. They name him Isaac, which means laughter, or the joke's on us.

Copyright © 2000 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

And in the end it is. The joke is on us. For once we turn to the things that really matter in God's creation, once we put our lives right, our spirit alive, our heart kindled with the simple and important things, God gives us everything there is. Since we no longer really need it, though, we are likely to fall down laughing at the joke God has played on us. We will be like Abraham, who, also, had a good laugh in the desert. Amen.

Copyright © 2000 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.