

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
Sunday, February 3rd, 2008
Last Epiphany-Transfiguration
Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

Psalm 2

2 Peter 1:16-21

While the Psalm is an important segment in the Liturgy of the Word, I fear that we too often don't pay enough attention to it. We may hear the words of the Old Testament, the Epistle, and the Gospel, but the Psalm? Well, it's just a pretty little chant, and, you know, those Psalm writers wrote a lot about dying, mortality, suffering suffering suffering, and I'd rather think about joy.

It also isn't often that we hear that God laughs. Did you catch it? It was in today's Psalm, fourth verse: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the lord has them in derision."

Today you heard it: God laughs.

It's not a gentle laugh, like a chuckle at a good joke; it's not an uproarious howl, like watching I Love Lucy re-runs; it's not even a sweet smile, as when we gaze on the latest antics of a two-year-old.

No, it's a laugh in derision: God is laughing saucily, a sarcastic laugh, at the foolishness of the nations and of the people who plot and revolt against God's own throne. And then -- next verse -- "he speaks to them in his wrath, and his rage fills them with terror."

This laugh of God is something like that of Dracula -- just before he sinks his teeth into the victim's neck. Or like so many other horror movies where the monster or ghoul or the undead laugh -- and then proceed to act out their rage.

And so beware: When God laughs, he may not be making a little joke.

"¹⁰ And now, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.

¹¹ Submit to the LORD with fear,
and with trembling bow before him;

¹² Lest he be angry and you perish;
for his wrath is quickly kindled."

It seems that God's anger is quick -- and to be feared. But it also seems that sometimes God will give us a warning -- in the form of a laugh.

When does God laugh?

Well, I suspect God laughs when he views the Church in disarray. When he sees us distracted by squabbles over property, or liturgy, or money (probably mostly

about money) so that we cannot take care of his poorest children. Lord knows (literally) how much energy is currently being expended over issues of Biblical literalism (or not), progressive theology (or not), inclusive sacraments (or not) – energy and resources that would go so *far* in expanding the mission of the Church – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and setting the prisoners free.

I suspect God laughs. But he's not laughing with us – he's laughing, as he does in the Psalm, at us.

I suspect God laughs at our foibles, too. Not a laugh of mockery or contempt, but a good belly laugh. When God hears me flub a blessing as I did last week. When we do something really wacky but with good intention. When we attempt eleven services in eight days. It's the sort of eye-rolling laugh both at *and* with us, a gentle rocking as God remembers that time after time we've gotten it right. When he has been praised and the people have been blessed.

There's not enough laughter in our world. Not enough good-naturedness. Not enough lively gentleness. Not enough foolishness. Laughter is an enormous gift from God – especially the sort of laughter we experience when we laugh at our own quirks and eccentricities. Like the amount of time some of us priests spend picking out vestments or adjusting the candlesticks “just so.”

I believe God laughs, you see, as a remedy to weeping. Life gives us lots of opportunity for tears, and tears are fine, as far as they go. But laughter may be more creative and courageous – when we laugh we enter into some sort of senseless space between what is and what ought to be. That space, said William Willimon, “is the beginning of all great deeds.” “Humor,” he wrote, “is a gracious byproduct of the unnerving realization that there is a God and we are not. A good laugh can bring us back to the good earth when we've tried to soar too close to the sun for our own good.”¹

In Psalm 2, about the only place in the Bible where God laughs, the Psalmist says that God laughs at kings. Presumably it takes God to see the downright silliness of our pretensions. The great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, defined sin as “taking ourselves too seriously.” And I *think* I might go along with him. (I'm not sure – don't quote me – I might change my mind.)

Perhaps what Niebuhr meant is that humankind, when we aspire to the sun, when we aspire to be more god-like, is easily tempted toward sin: Pride, arrogance, covetousness – and even more extreme sin: murder, adultery, and idol-worship. When we relax a little, when we take ourselves less seriously (and pretend less that we are gods), we are more apt to laugh. To be courageous in

¹ William Willimon, Sermon at Duke University, May 17, 1997.

our efforts to bring the kingdom closer. To *risk*. To push the envelope – to follow Christ, in fact.

When we acknowledge that we aren't gods or goddesses, shocking as that might seem to someone like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Britney Spears, when we acknowledge that we're humans with warts and bumps and inconsistencies, perhaps that's the time when we actually are *closer* in our relationship with the one true God. And it's in those moments that we can laugh at the foolishness of it all.

“God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of evildoers. He will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouts of joy.”² Even the book of that moaner Job (best remembered for receiving the “Why me, O Lord,” Award) reminds us that God is a god of laughter and a god of great joy. It is only the unbelieving who cannot see the merriment in God's magnificent creation – the aardvark, the platypus, the giraffe, the praying mantis, the brightly colored beetle and, yes, the hilarity in you and me.

The world is frightening, confusing, angry, weeping. Warring, dying, warming, and arguing.

And it is dancing and singing and laughing and loving.

It is absurd and it is lovely. It is baffling and honest.

Without the foolish gift of laughter we probably couldn't go on.

Novelist Milan Kundera says, “The devil laughs because God's world seems senseless to him; the angel laughs with joy because everything in God's world has its meaning.”³ Everything – even the aardvark – has meaning and purpose and beauty in God's world. Everything, no matter how bizarre, has a spark of God lying within.

And in that there is such joy.

This is the sound of God's laughter,
like nothing on earth, it fills
earth from grave to mountain-top,
lingers there a while, then like a great
bird spreading its wings for home or somewhere
like home,
heads out into silence,

² Job 8:20-21, NRSV

³ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1981, p. 232

gentle and endless ⁴

God's laughter assures us that joy will overcome evil. That life will overcome death. God's laughter – and ours – releases our tears from the well of fear, of loneliness, of grief – and assures us life is good.

There's a well-known saying, something along the lines of "Puritans are grumpy because they know that somewhere, someone is having a good time."

Let me suggest to you that we should have a good time. Dignity is not lost by a laugh. Sincerity is not harmed by wit. And our love of God is not diminished when we laugh.

Do something foolish today. Laugh at yourself. Thank God for humor. And have a good time.

Within limits, of course!

Amen.

⁴ Brendan Kennelly, "God's Laughter," 2003.