



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

God's Sense of Humor **Matthew 1:18-25**

Recall the occasion when God told Abraham that Sarah would give birth to a son. Abraham thought it was a divine joke. It simply could not happen--after all he was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. The very thought was preposterous. First of all, Sarah was too old to conceive, and the idea of soccer games and band concerts was more than good old Abe could imagine. When Abraham heard the news he fell facedown, and it was not in worship, but he fell over laughing.

Of course, Sarah had the same reaction. In the next chapter in Genesis these three strange visitors appeared in Abraham's camp and repeated the promise -- Sarah would have a child -- but this time Sarah was listening in on the conversation. She heard the promise that she would become a mother and burst out laughing.

Of course, you know the story. In time Sarah conceived and had a child. You know his name. His name was laughter. The Hebrew is *yitzak*, and we know it as Isaac.

We try to use human language to describe God. I went to my good ol' Westminster Confession of Faith and read its description of God. "God is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit . . . immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise . . . most loving, gracious, and merciful." And the definition goes on, but I think it leaves out something. God is funny, not peculiar, and pardon my anthropomorphism, but God laughs.

Many years ago one of my brothers gave my father a picture of Jesus. It was unlike any I have ever seen before, for in the picture Jesus is laughing. Yes, I believe with all my heart that God knows our suffering and our pain, God weeps with us, but God also laughs with us.

In C.S. Lewis' space fantasy, you can read about *Parelandra*. Parelandra is actually the planet Venus which is an unspoiled paradise. Unlike Earth where we dwell under Adam's curse, Parelandra is in a pristine state, it exists as God intended. One of the interesting features in Parelandra is when there is a storm, the thunder is heard as the laughter of God. Here on earth, we at times fear a storm,

but in Paralandra you can hear the belly laugh of God following a flash of lightning.

G. K. Chesterton defines humor as the “sudden perception of incongruity.” Humor happens at the cross section of our normal lives and the absurd. For example: One day at a bait shop over in Uncertain, Texas, by Lake Caddo a young man pulled up on his motorcycle. This young guy had tattoos, pierced ears, a pierced nose, pierced eyebrows, and a pierced tongue. The old bait shop proprietor had been sitting on the porch swatting mesquites, smoking unfiltered Camel cigarettes for the last fifty years, so this example of today’s youth subculture was completely outside of his experience. The young guy walked up and asked, “Got any boiled peanuts?” The bait shop owner stared at the young man’s face as he stubbed out his cigarette, he got up and started walking into the shop, then he turned to examine him more closely. Finally, still staring at the young man’s face, he asked, “Now son, tell me, exactly where were you standing when that tackle box exploded?”

Tattoos and body piercing, two of the hippest trends in today’s culture, were interpreted by the bait shop proprietor as the aftermath of a terrible accident. Incongruity, and the surprise that comes when you perceive an incongruity, lead to humor.

Today’s text is Matthew 1:18-25. I think Matthew was too pious, maybe a little too Presbyterian, to record the whole story. I cannot prove it, but it seems that he just left something out. The text begins with, “**This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.**” But I think that before this Matthew should have recorded, “One day God called the angel Gabriel into his divine presence. And God said, “Gabe, I have a job for you that you are going to love. Now you have to promise not to laugh. You know Joseph; he is the one who is engaged to Mary. He thinks everything is cool, but we are going to send a sudden incongruity into his life.”

Listen now to the rest of the text, and see if you can understand the humor:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” —which means, “God with us.”

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The humor of the Christmas story is that what seems like a nightmare to Joseph turns out to be the beginning of the greatest story ever told.

I think what adds to the humor is the way Joseph seems to be presented to us. He is a bit too serious. It is all conjecture, but being a carpenter, Joseph must have been a practical man. During the day, he took great pride in his work. When he came home at night he probably tended the garden, fed the animals, he may have even talked to them about all his troubles like Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof* talking to his lame horse. Or, looking up to heaven and saying, “God if this is how you treat your people, couldn’t you have chosen someone else?”

Joseph seems to be a man of few words, for though we are told about Joseph, he never says anything. There are no recorded words of Joseph in Scripture. He was the strong silent type.

I have an affinity for carpenters. My grandfather was a carpenter, and I always enjoyed watching my dad, thinking I was helping, when he made a doghouse or a tabletop. Joseph liked working with wood, a material you can measure and cut. Maybe he loved the same qualities in Mary, who appeared to be a simple girl whose smile could melt your heart.

Joseph had it all planned. The house was almost complete, the wedding date was set, the china had been registered, the invitations mailed. It would not be long until Mary and Joseph settled in and start a family. They had love, they had trust, and they had plans.

Then the day came when Mary knocked on Joseph’s door and said, “Joseph, I have to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Well, you had better sit down.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is news you don’t want to hear standing up.”

“What news?”

“Uhhh, I’m going to have a baby.”

“Of course, we are going to have many children. Why am I sitting down for that?”

“Joseph, I’m pregnant.”

Suddenly, Joseph’s plans, his plans for Mary, his plans for the house he was going to build, his plans for his entire future were shot down. And to make matters worse Mary said, “Oh, Joseph, don’t make a mountain out of a molehill. You see, there was this angel”

I am sure I am wrong, but there had to be smiles in heaven during that conversation. I mean, when you know the outcome has a happy ending you can enjoy the shock of the unsuspecting innocence of others.

You know those times when a couple has set a date on the preacher’s calendar for their wedding two years in advance, and one week before the preacher calls and jokingly says, “I just got tickets to the Super Bowl and you will have to find another preacher.”

Or, you call the chair of the Worship Committee and break the news that you have a flat tire, and will not make it to church, but the sermon is on the pulpit, all he needs to do is read it. Now the preacher is not going to the Super Bowl, and the tire is not flat, but the preacher, a practical joker, enjoyed the moment at the expense of the innocent, that is until the clerk of the Session says, “We are recommending to the congregation a 20% cut in your salary.” Now that is not so funny.

Our text tells us that Joseph had a dream which convinced him that Mary was telling the truth. But can you hear Joseph say, “Now I did not sign up for this.” And behind the scene I wonder if you can hear the Perelandrian thunder – the laughter of God. As Vic Pentz writes, “God has a way of coming into our lives like a merry prankster.”

God pulled a similar stunt on a gray haired couple, who had entered retirement years earlier. “Abraham, Sarah is going to have a baby.” And Abraham hit the ground laughing, but Isaac, the boy whose name means “laughter” was born.

I think there is evidence that the Almighty takes great delight in derailing our best laid plans, especially when we have planned out our lives giving little room or thought for God’s plan.

I have admitted to some of you that of all the things I do in my profession weddings make me the most nervous. Mothers and daughters have been planning the big event, in some cases, for over a year. Every detail is worked out, and I don’t want to be the one to mess things up.

One preacher who used to be in this Presbytery had a young lady come to his office with a software program she had bought for planning her wedding. Can't you hear God laughing? Sure, go ahead and plan your wedding, work out every detail. We humans try so hard to create tidy little worlds where we're in complete control. And just when we think we've managed to do so, that chuckle from heaven sounds again.

In 1993 Anthony Hopkins made the film, *Remains of the Day*. The movie is a series of flashbacks leading up to WWII by a butler looking back on a lifetime spent in the service of an aristocratic English family. Mr. Stevens, played by Anthony Hopkins, is the butler. He is compulsive and meticulous, a stickler for details; before dinner, he takes a ruler and goes down the table, measuring the distance between the edge of the table and the water glass at each place setting. He says things like, "Forgive me for being personal, but may I wish you a pleasant holiday?" His whole life is defined by being a butler, even to the point that one night when a dinner party is being held at the estate, he is told by a maid that his father, who had been ill, has just died upstairs, and Stevens replies, "I am indeed sorry, but matters of the utmost importance are happening under this roof tonight." Instead of attending his father on his deathbed, he continues serving.

The drama of this story increases when a wonderful woman on his staff, the head housekeeper, falls in love with him. Stevens is terrified, because love would complicate his tidy world. And so, cowering behind the armor of his dignity, he tells her of his deep respect for her professionalism and says nothing of any personal feelings he has for her as a woman. Finally, late in life, Stevens has one last chance to go to her. I won't ruin the film for you by telling you what happened. But there is a particularly symbolic scene that I will describe. Somehow a white pigeon gets into one of the sitting rooms of the estate, and Stevens is beside himself. He runs around chasing the pesky intruder, and finally he opens a window and throws out the dove. At that point, the camera angle shifts, and we're now seeing from the perspective of the dove, and it seems as if we see Stevens behind prison bars that obscure him from our view and trap him like an inmate in his castle.

Friends, the love of God in Christ invades our tidy worlds like a wild bird flying into our picture-perfect sitting room. God does not come to us as a decorative figurine we can place on the mantle. He comes into our lives as the Great Interrupter, the great Disruptor of our best-laid plans.

I am sure we all know the story of Alfred Nobel. The peace prize which he endowed was established because of a huge, unexpected surprise in his life. Nobel had been a phenomenally successful businessman; his business was the

manufacture and sale of weapons. He had spent a lifetime amassing a fortune as the inventor of dynamite. Then one morning Alfred Nobel got up, opened the morning newspaper, and read his own obituary on the front page. You see, his brother had died and the newspaper printed the wrong biographical information.

The headline read “Dynamite King Dead.” In that moment, Alfred Nobel saw how the world would remember him when he was gone, and he didn’t like it one bit. So he went to work changing his legacy, and in his will Alfred Nobel established the most prestigious prize on earth, awarded annually to the person who does the most to promote world peace: the Nobel Peace Prize.

Alfred Nobel’s wake-up call was one of God’s surprises. And when he heard that wake-up call, Alfred Nobel obeyed.

How about you? Has your life slipped on the divine banana peel lately? Could that unwelcome surprise have been God’s wake-up call to you? Consider this; by obeying God’s voice like Alfred Nobel did, perhaps you could bring more peace and less dynamite here on earth, more good will and blessing and hope among all people. Would that outcome be worth having a little joke played on you?

“Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded...” Joseph took Mary as his bride, and Scripture tells us he “had no union with her” until after the baby was born, so that the prophecy would be fulfilled. Soon thereafter he was forced to flee for his life to a foreign country, where he spent two years trying to learn Egyptian. We don’t know if he ever got the house of his dreams with the white picket fence and the nice yard.

So was letting himself be surprised by God and obeying God’s voice worth it? Oh, my goodness, think of the joy in Joseph’s life. He got to watch the Christ child take his first baby steps. He got to watch that heavenly toddler grow up. He taught the boy his love of simple honest wood, so that to the folks in the village, Jesus grew up to be known as “the carpenter.” But nothing could be a clearer expression of the special bond Joseph and Jesus shared than the fact that the boy became a preacher, who went out and taught the entire world to call God the very word he himself had called Joseph: the Hebrew word “abba”, which means “Daddy” ... “Father.” Oh yes, I think Joseph would have done it all again in a heartbeat.

The next time a monkey wrench drops out of heaven into your well-oiled machinery, don’t curse God. Look up and say thank you. Take a moment to see that unwelcome surprise as an opportunity to trust, a gift to receive, a command to obey. Because in the end, life gives us nothing we ever expected, but God will give us everything we’ve ever dreamed of. Just ask Joseph.

Let us pray. Lord, we work so hard to engineer surprises out of our schedules, to make our lives run like clockwork, and then we hear your chuckle from heaven. Help us to receive your surprises – pleasant and unpleasant – as gifts from you, and to obey your call to act, even when it goes against our plans. Lord, break into our tidy little worlds and send your dove, that we might know your love, even as you sent Jesus into the life of Joseph. Amen.