

“God’s Sense of Humor”

Genesis 11:1-9

1/9/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Sometime after the flood described in Genesis,¹ the name Nimrod appears among Noah’s great grandchildren. Nimrod was one of the first rulers on the earth and was considered a mighty hunter. His kingdom consisted of Babel, Ereh and Accad. Civilization had advanced to the point where they were using fired bricks in their building. By now, people had forgotten about the flood and so Nimrod wanted to build a town and a tower reaching up to the heavens – to “make a name for himself and the people.”

What he built was a ziggurat.² You might have seen a rendering from studies of the ancient Aztec peoples.³ It looks like a square layered birthday cake,

¹ There are about 26 male grandchildren mentioned and in that next generation. A lot of Frederick Buechner’s writing style from his *Wishful Thinking* and *Peculiar Treasures* works is mirrored in this work.

² **Ziggurat**, a temple-tower, the principal form of religious edifice in ancient Mesopotamia. Ziggurats were built from the 4th millennium BC to 600BC. Constructed of mud brick and often faced with glazed brick, they rose in stepped stages to a small temple or sanctuary at the peak. The most famous of the ziggurats was the temple-tower of Etemenanki (popularly associated with the Tower of Babel) at the temple of Marduk in Babylon, rebuilt by King Nabopolassar (reigned 625-605BC) and his son Nebuchadnezzar II. The largest ruins are those of the Elamite ziggurat at Choga Zambil (Dur Untash, Iran; 13th century BC), which is 102 m (335 ft) square at its base. The best preserved ruins are those of the ziggurat of Nanna at Ur built by Ur-Nammu (reigned 2113-2095BC), the first king of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur, and his son Shulgi (reigned 2095-2047BC) and entirely remodeled by Nabonidus (reigned 556-539BC), the last Babylonian king before the Persian conquest of Mesopotamia.

³ Babel, Tower of (Hebrew Babhel, from Assyro-Babylonian bab-ili, "gate of God"), according to the Old Testament (see Genesis 11:1-9), tower erected on the plain of Shinar in Babylonia by descendants of Noah. The builders intended the tower to reach to heaven; their presumption, however, angered Yahweh, who interrupted construction by causing among them a previously unknown confusion of languages. He then scattered these people, speaking different languages, over the face of the earth.

The story possibly was inspired by the fall of the famous temple-tower of Etemenanki, later restored by King Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia. The Genesis account appears to play on the Babylonian word bab-ili ("gate of God") and on the Hebrew words Babhel ("Babylon") and balal ("to

each level being built upon the last, getting smaller as it went up.

When the tower was almost completed, Nimrod and his advisors were planning a party in the penthouse suite at the top. Even the board of trustees and their families would be there. Well known actors and actresses and the wealthiest merchants were coming. Of course they would have a punch bowl and *horses oeuvres* for all the workers who were involved in the previous years of construction. They’d even have the chief priests invited to say token prayers in the ceremonies.

Just before the party, God was said to “come down” and notice this tiny project that humanity thought was so marvelous. God saw their pride and figured that this is only the beginning of this kind of arrogance and said “Let’s confuse their language.”⁴

The party didn’t come off as planned. While an administrative assistant was coming back with a red ribbon for the ceremony, there were only a few cartloads of bricks remaining for the finish work. The laborers were stacking the last few stone loads toward the top of the tower and a few union stonemasons were chiseling Nimrod’s name in one of the facing lintels. The arch-priest was inspecting the temple room at the



confuse"). The English words babel and babble are derived from the story.

In building technology the major developments concerned the scale of operations rather than any particular innovation. The late Stone Age communities of Mesopotamia had already built extensively in sun-dried brick. Their successors continued the technique but extended its scale to construct the massive square temples called ziggurats. These had a core and facing of bricks, the facing walls sloping slightly inward and broken by regular pilasters built into the brickwork, the whole structure ascending in two or three stages to a temple on the summit. Sumerians were also the first to build columns with brick made from local clay, which also provided the writing material for the scribes.

⁴ The “us” is like the creation account where God said “Let us make a person in our own image.” These verses contribute to the church’s sense of the concept of the Trinity, although some would conjecture that it may be referring to other heavenly hosts.

top, trying to figure out where his marble chair would go when one mason said to his friend, on the other side of the wall, “Say Julius, would ya hand me that chisel?” To which he replied, “lamma da-lup dé-lo fargō.”

“Say what?” the mason said. “Lamma da-lup dé-lo fargō” his friend said again.

“Julius, I think the sun is starting to get to ya. You know, the union has us take these brakes for a reason. “Say boss,” the worker called over to another direction, “I think Julius, here, got a little too much sun. OK if we go down for a break?”

And his boss responded, with kind of a strange look on his face, “La Pa lick-U-lata, to-peeka da la mellon yuh!” Which if translated from the Southern dialect of Uruguay-speak means “What’s going on; is everyone crazy ‘round here?” But there was no one to translate any of this mess, so everyone was talking funny and within moments, everyone began to scream at one another. Everyone stopped what they were doing and fighting broke out. Nimrod had a coronary, or something, and ended up face-down in the punch bowl.

A few centuries later, there is an elderly couple, both of whom had spent their years in the desert and have ruttled and sun-tanned cracked faces. Her name is Sarah and she has the latest false teeth made of fried china. Abe and Sarah had had quite a life.

Years before, they had gotten a good start in Mesopotamia. They had a nice tent in the suburbs, a two-camel garage and a barbeque pit. They had the room all fixed up for when the babies would start coming.

Sarah got her togas from Bonwits of Jordan and did volunteer work at the local infirmary tent. Abe was pulling down an excellent salary as a rancher. He had good fringe benefits and a retirement plan. And when they “got religion,” or religion got them, Abe was convinced that what God wanted them to do was move to Canaan — to hitch their u-hauls to a starry-eyed mule and ride.

When they finally got into the promised land, a nasty situation developed between Abe and Lot, his in-law. Lot said the place wasn’t big enough for all of them. Abe, having little business sense, graciously let Lot pick the half of the land he wanted first. Of course Lot, chose the half that was fertile pastureland around the Jordan River – leaving Abe with the disaster area

around Dead Man’s Gulch. In other words, all of Canaan was supposed to be “The Promised Land” but some parts of it were more promising than others. And yet God had chosen Abe and Sarah to be patriarchs of a great nation. Unfortunately, after extensive medical examinations, all leading authorities agreed that they were both as barren as most of the real estate with which they had been stuck.

So the years rolled by, like empty perambulators, and eventually all the unused baby clothes and toys were sold off in garage sales. But one day, there is a knock at their tent post. There’s an angel at the door, of all things, and in a few minutes Sarah is almost falling on the floor laughing. She’s wheezing and tears are running down her face as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair.

She’s laughing because she’s pushing ninety-one and last year Abe, as a joke, hired a muscle-bound weight lifter to show up at her birthday party and flex his biceps. And it just so happens that this angel, who was standing at their tent door — Who didn’t want coffee because the caffeine makes Her nervous — this angel told her that she and Abe are going to be parents. And even though Abe is able to keep a straight face longer than her, he lasts only a few seconds longer and cracks up as well. Even the angel tries to hide Her grin behind one of her wings but they can still see the laughter in Her celestial eyes.

Sarah and Abe are laughing because the angel not only seems to believe the news but expects them to believe it too. They’re laughing because if, by some chance, it should just happen to come true, then they would really have something to laugh about. They’re laughing with God and they’re laughing at themselves because laughter has that in common with weeping. Because no matter what the immediate occasion is for your laughter or your tears, the object of both ends up being yourself and your own life.

Sure enough, 91 year old Sarah delivers a boy and they call him Isaac, which, in Hebrew, means laughter.

Over and over, almost like a cartoon where Donald Duck gets run over by a steamroller and still picks himself up on the other side as flat as a pancake but alive, . . . God keeps humorously energizing humanity – saving the un-savable and conquering the unconquerable – with humor.

Job, in all of his suffering, how could he possibly

foresee that his bloodshot eyes would see the very One Who laid the foundations of the earth – about Whose work ‘the morning stars sang.’ Who could have predicted that God would choose Jacob, the con-artist who stole the family birthright away from Esau (the honest and reliable one). Who would have guessed that God would choose Moses, who was trying to beat a murder indictment in Egypt? Moses, who demanded that God get Aaron to do the public speaking in his place.

If we would have been God, would we have really picked David? David, who put a contract out on Uriah and had him killed and added Bath Sheba to his harem. Would we have chosen him to be king and write the national hymnbook for generations of God’s people to sing? Would we have determined that Bath Sheba’s second son would be born with a genius level IQ and become a renown national leader and an expert writer of religious wisdom literature?

Who would have foreseen that God would have promised to be Israel’s God and consider them a people to bless? Why them, the very people who immediately melted down their gold high school rings and made a calf-shaped idol around which to dance – the very people who carried on with every agricultural deity and fertility god that came down the pike?

After all, who would have imagined that the Messiah of the world would have an animal feeding trough for a crib and changing table and those ruffian shepherds would be the first to be treated to an angelic choir concert with 16 part music? It’s tragic and comic that thousands saw Jesus’ miracles of healing and His feeding an entire ballpark of people with only a kid’s sack lunch. But the miracles didn’t seem to stick to their ribs and few understood, least of all, the disciples. So that when He spoke of the necessity of His death, even Peter said, “Aren’t You going a bit too far with all this?”

Even the resurrection has a kind of comedy to it. His closest followers dismiss it as an idle tale. When Mary Magdalene meets Him risen, she thinks He’s the gardener, of all people.

But you know, it was not the world of public issues with which Jesus *primarily* dealt – but the private issues – the struggles of the world within us. Yet His life-long neighbors in His home town tried to kill Him during the coffee hour after His first sermon.

What, then, is the Kingdom of God? It’s not a reorganization of society as a political entity. Rather, it’s like the finding of a diamond ring that you thought you lost. It’s like winning the lottery that catches you by surprise and leaves you breathless.

It is hard to see for its simplicity. It is harder for a wealthy person to enter God’s kingdom than it is to get a Mercedes through a revolving door. Harder for a person (who is totally absorbed by his or her wealth) to enter the Kingdom than it is for Bill Gates to squeeze himself through the night deposit slot of the First National City Bank. The Kingdom is surprising and unexpectedly humorous.

Jesus’ parable about prayer could be retold, . . . that God is like the crooked lawyer who is writing what he hopes to be a best seller book about his Watergate involvement and couldn’t care less whether or not a woman wins her suit against the power company – but finally tells his secretary to show her in anyway – just so she won’t keep bothering him.

Jesus’ other parable about God’s care for our prayers could be retold, . . . If your ten year old asks you for a goldfish, do you give her a black widow spider? If she comes to you for an Eskimo Pie, do you knock out her two front teeth? It’s almost as if Jesus was saying that if you ask a foolish question, you get a foolish answer – of course God cares for us.

And then there’s the amusing parable of the talents. Retold, . . . the five-talent man puts his five coins on the race horse “Beautiful Dreamer” to come in first in the fifth at Saratoga, and then doubles his money. The two talent man gets his broker to buy him two shares of Niagara Mohawk and when the market goes up, he does as well as the first. But the one talent man, on the other hand, plays it safe. He figures his boss is a hard driver and stuffs it in an old sock and shoots it up the chimney.

And as Jesus’ listeners wait for the punch line, with them, we think the master will say “play it safe, don’t play the ponies, . . . God is a hard God so treasure what is given to you so you’ll be sure you’ll still have it the next time you’re audited. Remember the depression!”

But comically, Jesus says ‘to the one who has much, more will be given; and to the one who has little – even what he has – will be taken away. The

risk God wants out of us is not what we expect. God's demands are sometimes viewed as outlandish because God does impossible things with impossible odds and impossible people.

The humor of God is especially apparent in the greatest parable of them all – the one mistakenly entitled “The Prodigal Son.” Of course you remember it.

The younger son goes off and blows his inheritance on liquor, sex and fancy clothes until he finally doesn't have two cents left to rub together – he's got bounced checks all over town. He figures he's made a total fool of himself and has broken his dad's heart – but his dad is still a meal ticket. So he rehearses his apology speech but before he gets a chance to use it, his dad spots him coming around the corner of the tennis court and starts sprinting down the driveway – almost falling into the swimming pool. He throws his arms around his son and all but knocks him off his feet with tears and whiskers and laughter of welcome.

His dad doesn't say “I hope you learned your lesson!” or “I told you so!” Instead, he throws a party.

Meanwhile, as you know, the older brother, whom this parable is really about (if we notice to whom Jesus tells the story), . . . the brother gets so bent out of shape about his younger brother's indiscretions, he becomes consumed with envy, pride, anger and resentment – and his blood pressure just about explodes from his unhealthy emotional state.

The real joke of it all is that the father equally loves both boys and always will love them – only the older son never noticed it because it was never love for which he was looking. He only wanted his share of strokes and money. The fatted calf, the best Scotch, the party – all could have been his any time he would have asked – except that he never thought to ask because he was too busy trying to cheerlessly and religiously *earn* them.

People, today, who haven't stopped to take Jesus seriously, remain blind to God's comedy because they are too trapped by their own dead seriousness about themselves and life. And often the so-called “religious ones” are like the ‘blind guides, leading the blind’ – if we remember Jesus' Jewish humor. Most people are blind to the beauty and wildness of the day and the world around us. Jesus

had to ask us this way – ‘Isn't life more than clothes, . . . more than food? Consider the lilies of the field. They don't work or nervously watch their certificates of deposits but Solomon, in all of plumage of his honorary doctorates, couldn't hold a candle to them.’

Sometimes we are so organized, planning our lives out like investments on a Monopoly game board, that we are prepared for everything except our God's creativity and humor. We expect that God strikes hard bargains and will pay only an hour's pay for an hour's labor – as in the parable. In reality, though, God ends up blessing the last people we'd expect – despite how they're doing on society's popularity charts.

We can get prepared for pot-luck dinners but never expect that a down-and-out rebellious teen – who has really caused parents anxiety – to straighten out and be motivated into action by God's Spirit.

This is the good news of the Gospel – that into our world of orderliness, predictability, tradition, control and scientific laws of probability – God *can* change us and the circumstances surrounding us. ‘The one with ears, let them hear.’ Sometimes an angry, drugged, college flunky turns out to be a biblical scholar. Sometimes a wintry cold marriage grows into a Spring-like love. And like Sarah laughing, with her false teeth by her tent, maybe we should laugh – that the impossible can come about in our lives. As your bulletin board says in the hall, “Expect the impossible with God.”

This is the Gospel – the paradox – the unexpected that keeps breaking into our lives. It's the power, veiled behind the quiet teaching of Jesus.

Where people expected Him to move into Herod's palace and tell the Emperor to ‘take a hike,’ . . . He stood around the table with His followers, for the last time, and gave them His last object lesson. The broken bread foreshadowing His broken body. The wine for remembering his blood loss.

It is in the power of Jesus' unexpected behavior that we gain new life – His unexpected death gave us new life. His unexpected resurrection gave us life forever. How much do you expect from God? Is it more than you can now control or imagine? Funny thing is, we get what we expect. ■