

Good Sunday morning from a sunny hill in Rockport.....

How do we “reset” our lives? I think I’ve been subconsciously asking myself that question throughout this past week. We hit that little “rest” button on our computers and poof!, we start over with a clean slate, or at least a clean screen. And if that doesn’t work, we’re instructed to hit “control, alt, delete” or some similar cyberspace mantra and then poof!, all is well again, usually....

I don’t know about each of you reading these words, but hitting that “reset” button each morning is more challenging some days than others, yes? New crises, new numbers of virus-related chaos, new warnings, new news of more deaths caused by violence in the midst of racial protests and panic. “Enough already!”, I say to myself.... and so, some days, I retreat to the deck to watch the birds, or sit down at the coffee table and put a few more pieces in the latest jigsaw puzzle before me.... or, I read your responses to me after you’ve read these meditations.

I try to keep some sense of perspective. Do you? Speaking of Jesus.... the stories we read of him in the New Testament attest to his uncanny (?) ability to keep perspective, to keep his eye on the target/the goal/the reward at the end.... Can we keep our eyes on the prize, and the price, of living? The Bible tells us Jesus did. So, each day, I say to myself, “Buck up, Susan! Things will get worse, then they’ll get better, then they’ll get worse, then they’ll get better....” It’s all part of the Grand Scheme of Life.... and we’ll all in it together..... I find comfort in that realization, do you?

Blessings to all this Spring morn..... Susan

p.s. You will note the sermon below is not single-spaced! I had one of my readers tell me recently they liked the double-spacing of the sermon – made it easier to read! So, here below again, the sermon double-spaced!

p.p.s. Shortly (within an hour or two!) I will download this morning’s scripture reading and sermon to my facebook page: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated’s Facebook page....

p.p.p.s. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks, bringing my own libation, and carrying my own lawn chair.... and maybe bug net, too! Be in touch if you’re interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to freerangepastor@gmail.com.....

A simple online worship service for Sunday, June 14, 2020

**as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

God of grace, we gather “on line” to worship, to pray, to hum,
and to build community while we restore ourselves.
Be with us. Encourage us to open our minds and hearts
to encounter your goodness,
and have our spirits be buoyed by your presence
in each of our homes.
Amen.

A Prayer of Confession & Assurance of Pardon *



When all seems lost and circumstances leave us feeling empty and afraid....
God of unwavering hope, may your words of life burn within our hearts.
When trust seems impossible and our eyes remain tightly closed
to the constant breaking in of Spirit....
God of unwavering faith, may your words of life burn within our hearts.
When our spirits feel dry and listless and where hurt or resentment
creates barriers to human care and friendship....
God of unwavering love, may your words of life burn within our hearts.
We are fellow travelers, alive to God’s constant word of faith, hope, and love.
We journey into life in new ways.
May we take to heart God’s gift of presence, peace, and forgiveness.
Let us receive it gladly and live it with passion and boldness.
Amen.

* Adapted from a Prayer of Confession & Assurance of Pardon
in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, May 8, 2011.

A Reading of Scripture – Genesis 18:1-15

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your yourselves, and after that you

may pass on – since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

A sermon based on Genesis 18:1-15 **“Why did Sarah laugh....”**

Pray with me. God, you are full of surprises! Help us loosen up and make ready to receive your gifts to us this day. Open our ears to hear your words of wonder in the midst of the turmoil of our times. Amen.

First a retelling of part of this morning’s text, in the first person.

“Hello. You may think I am Mary Magdalene, the woman who came to tell you about some of the events of Jesus’ life. But I am a distant, distant relative of hers. I lived about 2,000 years before Mary Magdalene.

My husband was Abraham.

My name is Sarah.

You heard in your scripture reading this morning about the Lord coming to see Abraham and me in the form of three strangers. The Lord had come to say that I would bear a child.

Did I laugh? You bet I laughed! A deep, disgusted, angry laugh. And Abraham laughed, too, don’t forget that.

Imagine: PREGANT at my age!

All those years of longing, praying, hoping, dreaming –

For what? Nothing!

More wandering, more loneliness, more nasty remarks from the neighbors –
“Oh how sad, poor Sarah, barren all these years. What sin is she paying for?”

And then to be told this bad joke: pregnant at NINETY!

What could I do but laugh?

Crying was out of the question with something so ludicrous as this.

But then reality – and the anger of it – set in.

Why now, God? Why after all these years? What’s the point?

I’ve never known you to be this cruel!

And yet, after the initial shock, Abraham and I thought – why not?

God had always been surprising us, shocking us,
pushing the limits just a little more each time, inviting us to trust in new and
unexpected ways.

Was this really any different from all the other challenges?

I remember the night after the messengers had come;
Abraham had tipped the bottle a little and crawled into the tent rather sheepishly,
almost like a nervous young man.

He made some silly remark about needing to sleep with me – how it was
God’s will – and we laughed and we loved into the night.

And when it came true, I was horrified – all of the joy I had once had
dreaming of giving birth gave way to dreadful fear.

Abraham held me close, and we cried and questioned together, and
wondered, and we wondered . . .

And no small eternity later Isaac was born,
and I whose dreams had all but dried up held that little bundle to my breast.

And I watched Abraham hold him aloft so proud beyond words I was
overcome with joy and thanksgiving for a God so full of surprises.

Laugh? You bet I laughed.”^[1]

Wouldn’t YOU have laughed if you had been Sarah? I would have laughed,
and said, “Oh, don’t be silly! This is ridiculous!” But as I thought about this text
from Genesis, the beginning of our sacred story of faith, this past week, I found
myself thinking about the times in my life when God has surprised me.

Deep into the night of August 23rd, 1993, my 45 years of fearing the worst
thing that could happen in my life happened. My mother died. And I thought for
sure I would die. But I didn’t. As sure as anything I have ever believed, God
surprised me and appeared in my mother’s nursing home room in those early
morning hours, as sure as the three agents of God appeared to Abraham. No words

came, but an all encompassing sense of relief and grief all at once enveloped me. I knew at that moment that I was going to go on living because my mother had lived for me. God surprised me with a new found strength and will.

In the winter of 1994, I received a phone call from a person inviting me to go to Russia in late summer of that year with three other American women – to teach a group of Russian women how to do community service using democratic principles. I laughed! And then I responded, “Oh, don’t be silly! That’s ridiculous! I’ve never been out of the United States!” But God surprised me with a courage to go into a totally unknown and foreign situation beyond anything I could have imagined at the time.

In early September of 1994, I stood beside my three American colleagues on a street corner in Novorossisk in the south of Russia. We watched and listened to Russian soldiers march by in formation playing Russian anthems proudly on the occasion of Liberation Day marking the liberation of the Russians in Novorossisk at the end of World War II. One of my colleagues looked at me and said, “Did you ever think we would be standing here saluting Russian soldiers on their soil in friendship?” I shook my head and smiled and said, “No.” Again, God surprised me with new friends and a new understanding of the world I never expected to have.

In April of 1995, when I returned to Florida after a trip to Maine, I said to my brother, “John, I’m going to leave our business and go to seminary.” He laughed and said to me, “That’s ridiculous! You’ve never even been to church or looked at the Bible!” And I laughed and said, “You’re right, but I’m going to go to seminary anyway.” And God surprised me again with a new found conviction I never knew I had.

In August of 1996, Tacy French, who was the minister at United Christian Church in Lincolnville, invited me to lead worship and preach for the first time. I laughed and said, “Oh Tacy, that’s ridiculous! I haven’t even had my preaching class yet!” And she said, “That’s alright, just talk about your story.” And God surprised me again with words of faith to say and more assuredness that I had made the right decision to go to seminary.

Here are five questions for you. Don’t worry about writing them down. If you receive my mailings on line, this sermon and these five questions will be there today.

How has God surprised you in your life?

What gifts have you been given that you didn’t expect?

What crises and losses have you suffered and sustained and lived through that you thought you could not bear?

What risks have you taken that have born more fruit than you could ever have imagined?

Where have you found new strength and will, new courage, new friends and new understandings, new convictions and words of faith you didn't know you had?

Sarah laughed when God came unexpectedly in the form of three strangers. They told her she was going to have a child who would be named Isaac, which means "he laughs." Abraham laughed, too, don't forget that. Sarah and Abraham found new strength and will, new courage, new understandings, new convictions and words of faith they didn't know they had.

Were all *my* life's surprises that made me laugh truly visitations from God, or just a whole string of coincidences? I don't have a clue, but they led me to being here with you, and that, to me, is all that matters.

May we go into these coming weeks and months of chaos and confusion caused by a new and vicious virus and renewed racial tensions.... heirs to the laughter and faith of the stories of Sarah and Abraham – overcome, as they were, with joy and thanksgiving for a God so full of surprises. Let the people say, "Amen!"

To hold in our prayers this day.....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... and all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel and senseless death of George Floyd and so many others....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared, and her niece Pam, and Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali.... *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Benediction *

*Life is short, no matter the length of our days.
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts*

*of those who make the way with us.
So be swift to love. Make haste to be kind.
And believe that God, the creator,
Jesus, the redeemer, and
the Holy Spirit, the sustainer,
will be with us no matter the length of our days.
Amen.*

*adapted from the words of Henri Auriel

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, June 21, 2020 – Father’s Day

Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17;
Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Words to ponder today.....

“As soap is to the body, so laughter is to the soul.” ~ A Jewish Proverb

“Earth laughs in flowers.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Grim care, moroseness, and anxiety – all this rust of life ought to be scoured off by the oil of mirth. Mirth is God’s medicine.” ~ Henry Ward Beecher

“I commend mirth.” ~ Ecclesiastes 8:15

*“Laughter is God’s hand on the shoulder of a troubled world.”
~ Bettenell Huntznicker*

^[1]Adapted from a monologue written by Donald Schmidt, 1997. It appeared in *The Whole People of God, Weekly Worship Resources* for Sunday, June 16, 2002, p. 19)