

## CUE THE LAUGHTER

There are two ways of looking at getting old. One is the Betty Davis kind of understanding: “Old age ain’t for sissies.” In other words, as the years go by, expect things to get worse. Maybe even much worse. So, prepare yourself for aching joints, failing memories, ever-deepening wrinkles, gravity-challenged skin, and mounting health issues.

I got a hint that time was closing in on me when I had my annual physical—what my health insurance company calls a “wellness exam”—a few months ago. And for the very first time I heard my doctor say something to me he had never said before.

“At your age. . . “

Wait a minute, doc. What do you mean, “at my age”? You must have mistaken me for another one of your patients.

In my mind I’m in my thirties; but I’ve discovered that my body is in another, more realistic time zone. Which is why I often find myself thinking, “What’s going on here? I used to be able to do this without a problem. I used to stay up until midnight or later and be none the worse for wear the next day. “I used to be able to get out of bed in the morning without sounding like a box of *Rice Krispies* that go, “Snap, Crackle, Pop.” “I used to be able to pick up fifty pound bags of ice melt and feel no ill effects. “I used to be able to look at the top of my scalp and see more hair growing there.”

But now, at my age . . . .

Then I think, “Well, Fred, what did you expect? Old age ain’t for sissies.”

But there’s another, more pleasant way to look at getting old. We could call it “aging well.” Some of the ways to grow gracefully into our elder years might be: maintaining positive relationships with our spouses, children and grandchildren; staying as healthy as possible through diet, exercise and physical and mental activity; and having a positive attitude about things that are out of our control, even when those things are difficult and painful.

There’s one other thing I could add to the list of how to age well. And that’s humor. I think having a sense of humor can make growing old more endurable and less unpleasant.

Personally, I love to laugh. And, if you haven’t already noticed, I also love to make other people laugh. Some days I’m more successful at it than others,

of course, but I give it the old college try because laughter really can help us make it through the rougher, harder moments of senior living.

Interestingly, laughter is rarely mentioned in the Bible. In the New Testament, for example, laughter is only mentioned twice. In the ninth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus went to the grieving home of the leader of the local synagogue after his little daughter died. And when Jesus told the tearful, wailing crowd that the little girl was only sleeping, they all laughed.

Their laughter was mocking, cynical and scornful. How could Jesus speak of life when there was so much death? It was the laughter of disbelief, an expression of the crowd's lack of faith. Easter after Good Friday? Ha! Tell me another one!

The second mention of laughter in the New Testament, which is found in the sixth chapter of Luke, is the joyous laughter of surprise, of unexpected reversal. It's the smile that breaks out on our face when things go better than we thought they would; it's the delighted grin that comes when we experience the undeserved, unexpected grace of God. Jesus promised, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there is only one mention of laughter: the geriatric laughter of Sarah and Abraham when God told them they were going to have a baby. This meditation I'm offering you on aging, the approaching end of life, and the eventual intrusion of death that all human beings will experience, is appropriate because we're in the season of Lent, moving toward the tragedy of the cross. We began this season on Ash Wednesday, with the somber words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

And in today's Old Testament reading we meet a couple of very old people, whose best days seemed to be behind them and the grave was right in front of them. Sarah was old—90 years old. Her back bent and full of arthritis, with no teeth and struggling with digestive problems, God promised Sarah and her "as good as dead" husband, Abraham (that's how Abraham was described in the letter to the Hebrews) that they would be the parents of a great family, a family through which all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Ninety-nine year old Abraham let out a toothless cackle when he heard God's promise. And when Sarah overheard the Lord talking to her husband about how they would soon need to go shopping for baby bottles and bassinets at her advanced age, she couldn't help herself. She wasn't able to hold it in. She laughed. God asked, "Did I hear you laugh, Sarah?" even though God knew perfectly well the answer to that question.

While Sarah was undoubtedly thinking on the inside, "You tell a ninety-year-old childless woman that's she's going to have a baby and you expect me

to keep a straight face?” on the outside she tried to do damage control out of fear that God would be angry with her. “Why would I laugh? It must have been the wind, or the neighbor’s dog barking.”

The Lord called her bluff. No, Sarah. Admit it. You laughed.” And then God said, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Since you thought what I told you was funny, I’m going to have you name your new baby “Isaac,” which means “Laughter,” as a reminder that the joke is on you.”

In Genesis, three chapters later, the Lord kept that promise to Sarah. She became pregnant. And nine months later she laughed all the way from the geriatric ward to the maternity ward! Isaac was born! And Sarah laughed. But this time, it wasn’t the laughter of cynical disbelief; it was the laughter of wonderment. Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; and everyone who hears it will laugh with me!”

Can’t you just imagine Abraham and Sarah getting together with their friends at the local McDonald’s for a cup of coffee? Usually they sit in the booth and talk about gall bladder surgery or the possibility of a knee or hip replacement. But now there’s a beaming, smiling Sarah with a baby carrier next to her. And everybody is having a wonderful time, laughing with Sarah at God’s ability to work wonders. As Jesus said many years later, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.” Because nothing is too hard for God.

When the cynical laughter of doubt and disbelief turns into the astonished, stupefied laughter that comes from the unexpected intrusion of a loving, living God; when the preposterous promises of God are surprisingly fulfilled, we can’t help ourselves. We laugh. And even though we’re deep into the dark days of Lent, the glorious, heavenly light of Easter shines. So it seems that laughter is a close cousin to faith. Laughter can be a humble recognition that the fate of the world, and the destiny of our lives, isn’t left entirely up to us. God is always busy, active, at work, so we don’t have to give up hope for ourselves or for the world. And we can even laugh at times!

Maybe I’m wrong about this—I certainly hope I’m not—but I believe older people, maybe because they’ve seen so much and lived through so many challenges and hardships, sometimes have a greater capacity to laugh. That’s true for me, anyhow. Even when events are sad or tragic, God helped them make it through the tough days and enabled them to carry on over the years, and that leads them to rejoice that there’s nothing too difficult for God to accomplish; there’s no problem so tough that God can’t help them overcome it.

Author, professor and United Methodist bishop William Willimon shared the following story that happened when he was the pastor of a small southern church.

Her husband died unexpectedly, after a brief illness. She was in shock and filled with sorrow. They had been best friends for more than forty years. When it came time for his funeral, I greeted her and the funeral procession at the front door of the church. As she walked she was watched over by attentive family and friends who were following just behind his casket. I offered her my hand and led her up the steps of the church.

Just before we began our walk down the aisle, as the congregation began singing an Easter hymn, she turned to me, pointed toward the casket and said, “My husband Joe was a wonderful man with a good heart, but he never cared much for church, God bless him. I pleaded with him many times to come with me to church more often, but he told me he had other things he wanted to do. Now, he has no choice. He can’t refuse. So let’s take him in!”

And then, said Willimon, she smiled. Dare I say she laughed—at least on the inside. And with that I knew that she had given the sting of death the slip. The sorrow of the grave didn’t have her trapped. In the face of death, she found a glimmer of happiness. It was a very Easter kind of moment.

Happiness at a funeral? Laughter in the face of death? Well, there is a precedent for that in the Christian church, you know. One of the early church fathers described Easter as “a joke that God played on the devil.” In other words, God had the last laugh on death and darkness, on suffering and sorrow. And because of that, we can laugh, too.

One more story to share, which I got from a book called *Craddock stories*, by Fred Craddock.

I used to know this kid down home who’d believe anything you’d tell him. You could say, “The schoolhouse burned down. We’re not having school tomorrow.”

“Oh boy!” he’d say. He’d believe it.

“They’re giving away free watermelons down at the town hall.”

“Really? Free watermelons?” And he’d go running off.

“Did you know the President of the United States is coming to our town tomorrow?”

“He is? Whoopie!” That kid just believed everything.

I remember once there was an evangelist who came to our town, set up a big tent and invited everyone to a revival meeting. Most of the town showed up for it. And the evangelist said to that kid, “God loves you and cares for you and will raise you up and raise you to eternal life just like he raised up Jesus to eternal life!”

And do you know, that kid believed it? He actually believed it.

Think of how much joy and laughter there would be in our lives if we

actually believed it, too.

Sort of like the laughter of Sarah, when she took out her dentures at night before she went to bed, looked in the mirror and gently stroked that growing bump in her belly. Cue the laughter. Because nothing is too hard for God. Thanks be to the Lord. Amen.