

Living With Courage and Resilience
Part 3: Abraham and Sarah (Faith)

by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

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Scripture: Genesis 15:1-6, 17:1-21, 18:1-12; Romans 4:1-3

I started my ministry at Countryside ten years ago tomorrow. I have always considered my first act as your Senior Minister, however, to be attending the Carlos Santana concert the night before at CenturyLink with Countryside member, Bob Newell. I had purchased a pair of scalped tickets in the twentieth row from center stage as a way of celebrating my new position. I invited Bob because I knew he played bass. I'm not sure Bob knew quite what to think as he watched his new Senior Minister standing in the aisle the whole time, rocking out and playing air guitar, but we had a good time.

I find it a fun "coincidence," therefore, that on the very evening that we were being awestruck by Carlos Santana, now ten years later, a great many of us will find ourselves at the CenturyLink tonight for another incredible evening. It won't be Carlos Santana on stage but instead will be Countryside Church, along with the Jewish and Muslim congregations of the Tri-Faith Initiative! When I arrived ten years ago, I didn't even know the Tri-Faith Initiative existed. Being part of it wasn't even remotely in the plan I had for Countryside, or the plan Countryside had for me. Well, as they say, "The surest way to make God laugh is to make plans"! I'm sure that God will be having a good chuckle tonight.

Laughter, actually, is a part of the whole experience of being a person of faith that is often undervalued or overlooked entirely. Yet in today's social and political climate, one of our greatest assets for living with courage and resilience may just be reacquainting ourselves with laughter as a component of any healthy faith.

Many of you know who Brian McLaren is. Brian has been right in the center of about every significant moment in the development of the new Christian paradigm some are calling Convergence for the past twenty years and is the author of an armful of books, including *A Generous Orthodoxy*, *A New Kind of Christianity*, and, significantly, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World*. Recently, I interviewed Brian on the *Converging Paths* Podcast and asked him about his earliest memory of when God first became real for him and therefore important. He said it was at church camp when he was 15 years old. Brian confessed that he'd gone primarily because of some pretty girls he knew would be there, but instead of falling in love with any one of them, he fell in love with God.

As Brian recounts the experience, he and some friends had made an agreement to sneak away from their cabins one night after curfew and climb to the top of a hill to hang out together. Once there, Brian walked several yards away from his companions to lie down in the grass and look at the stars. It was a chilly, crystal clear, October evening and the sky was like a sea of stars.

Says Brian, "I remember looking up at the stars and having the sense that not only was I looking out at the stars but I was *being seen*. And I began to feel this feeling of being noticed and being known by name, and I felt this immense love just pouring into me. I was not brought up Pentecostal – we thought Pentecostalism was of the devil – but I ended up having an experience Pentecostals talk about called 'holy laughter.' I'd never heard of such a thing but what happened was this feeling of being loved was so strong that I just felt filled with joy and I started to laugh. And I was crying a little bit and laughing a little bit and had this feeling of being so full, so full of joy, and so loved.

"This is especially meaningful to me," says Brian, "because for the past two years I had kind of doubted whether God existed. That night I was sure of one thing: love existed. This really became significant for me because, from that time on, my default experience of God was an experience of love. It wasn't an experience of condemnation, or fear, or guilt, or even forgiveness. It was primarily an experience of love. At one point I remember praying, 'Stop this, stop this please, I can't take this anymore.' It was this feeling like I was going to explode it was so intense."

An explosion of love, followed by an explosion of laughter. This is what set Brian on the path of faith and he has been walking it boldly ever since – you could even say, with "courage and resilience."

Another person of faith who exhibits courage and resilience is Abraham, the father of the world's three great monotheistic faiths. When the apostle Paul talks about Abraham's significance, he says that it isn't his great works or amazing piety that makes him such an important figure for us. It is his faith, completely apart from any good deeds or purity of heart. To support his claim, Paul cites Genesis 15 where God appears to Abraham and promises him a child in his old age, through whom a great nation would emerge and bless the world. Says the author, "Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." In other words, faith – understood here as trust in God's promise – was all the righteousness he needed.

Curiously, there is another version of this same encounter with God found in the book of Genesis, written by a different author. The version we just referred to in Genesis 15 –

the one that Paul cites in his case that faith, not righteousness, is what set Abraham apart – was written by an author whom Biblical scholars refer to as the Yahwist because he always refers to God as Yahweh. We don't know exactly when the Yahwist wrote his version of the story, but certain clues indicate he may have been a member of Solomon's royal court, writing in the late 10th Century BCE. The second version of the story, which may be found two chapters later, in Genesis 17, was written several centuries later – probably the middle of the 6th Century – by a person, or more likely a group of people collectively referred to as the Priestly Writer. Often, you can detect the Priestly Writer's hand in Genesis because, in contrast to the Yahwist, he (they) never refers to God as Yahweh, but only as "Elohim," which is a generic term meaning "God."

The Priestly Writer's version of Abraham's faith story can, in some ways, be seen as a counter-narrative to that of the Yahwist. It's not that the Priestly Writer necessarily disagrees with the Yahwist's version, but he expands the Yahwist's version, providing greater detail concerning the covenant promises God makes to Abraham. Then, the Priestly Writer adds something completely unexpected. Once God finishes promising that Abraham would become the father of a multitude in his old age, and promising that a great nation would arise from his descendants who would become a blessing to the world, the Priestly Writer does not say that "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Rather, the Priestly Writer says Abraham "fell on his face and laughed."

Laughed?!

As a person of exemplary faith, doesn't it seem strange that Abraham would laugh so hard he could no longer stand before the Almighty God who was trying to tell Abraham something quite serious about God's plans for the future? Would not God take this as a sign not of Abraham's faith-fullness but his faith-lessness?

Well, apparently not if the God of Abraham is also the God of Brian McLaren ... or the God of the Priestly Writer. What the Priestly Writer and Brian McLaren seem to know, that we often forget, is that God's wild love for us is completely absurd. Most of the time, we struggle just to love ourselves in light of our glaring imperfections. We work hard not to show others the true extent of our imperfections, but we see them quite plainly. So if God sees our faults even more plainly than we do, then not only is God's love for us absurd, but any thought that God would want to do great things for the world through us seems completely Looney Tunes. How could God possibly think great things could come from the likes of us when we really are more suited to living on the Island of Misfit Toys?

So Abraham laughed until his belly ached ... until he cried out, "Stop this, stop this please, I can't take this anymore," feeling like he was going to explode. But in the end, he trusted God more than he trusted himself and his ability to know what's what. This is where Abraham's faith distinguishes him from 99.99% of the rest of us whom God seeks to work through. His faith was a *laughable* faith. It was a laughable proposition God made to Abraham but once he got up from the ground, he trusted God anyway.

If this is how Abraham responded to God – with laughter and then trust – then we, as the spiritual descendants of Abraham, should really be known for our laughter as much as for our faith. If we aren't laughing, then we probably haven't grasped the magnitude and absurdity of what God is continuing to try to do through us. Or did you think that God's desire to bless the entire world through Abraham's descendants has already been fulfilled?

"But wait," you say, "aren't you making too much of the Priestly Writer's counter-narrative? After all, the older guy, the Yahwist – the one closer to the scene by several centuries – didn't write of Abraham laughing."

True enough. The Yahwist didn't write of Abraham laughing. But in the very next chapter, he wrote of *Sarah laughing* when she heard the news! (Genesis 18:1-12) So the joke's on us serious folks.

Taken together, we now have both people of faith – Abraham and Sarah – laughing their heads off when God reveals what God wants to do through them. If we, their spiritual descendants, aren't laughing too, we probably haven't gotten the memo regarding what God wants to do with us. (Perhaps we haven't even looked?)

Well, if you still have your doubts about all this laughter stuff, consider this: Abraham and Sarah were told – no, commanded – to name their son Isaac. Do you know what "Isaac" means in Hebrew? "He laughs!"

Why would God tell this couple who laughed until their bellies ached when the totality of God's love was revealed name their child "He laughs" if God didn't want their descendants to continue laughing themselves? Remember, it's not ultimately about the humor. The laughter is really a response to an overwhelming sense that, when we look out at the stars, someone is looking back at us – and loving us beyond our scarcest ability to imagine; *a Love who invites us to orient our faulty, freakish, misfit lives around this Love in order that the Creator of heaven and earth might work through us to cover the earth with love and laughter.*

So once upon a time, a group of Jews and a group of Muslims became good friends after some Muslim terrorists turned planes into bombs and attacked our country.

"Yea, right. Like that would ever happen!"

Then these same Jews and Muslims decided to move to West Omaha and locate right next to each other so they could save money on a parking lot.

"Come on, stop it. That's absurd."

Then God stepped in and said, "Why not invite some Christians to build alongside you? Then, instead of just saving a little money on the parking lot, you can help Me save the world from self-destruction!"

"Like that would ever happen ..."

And God told them, "I'll help you overcome differences that have fundamentally separated your three faiths since the very beginning so that you can help avert the next world war and bring humanity into a new, more sustainable relationship with each other and with Me."

"Ha! Even if you could get a Christian church to believe this absurd vision, they'd never leave a building they love, and a neighborhood they love, and raise millions and millions of dollars just for the privilege of building a church they don't need and leaving a neighborhood they don't want to leave, based on the simple faith that God asked them to do it. Why, that kind of expectation is downright *laughable!*"

Precisely.