

5/1/22 HOLY HUMOR SUNDAY

WELCOME

Good morning! Welcome to Alexanderwohl!

This has been an eventful weekend with many of you taking shelter Friday night or perhaps looking at strange sights in the sky. By the grace of God, we are here and able to worship, even while we are aware of the destruction and loss for people in the Andover community.

Today is several weeks after Easter, and in the Christian calendar, Easter isn't over yet. There's a whole season called Eastertide. During this season, we focus on living in the hope and joy of resurrection for our lives.

We are trying something new to try by having a Sunday for humor in the spirit of that joy.

The intent of humor is not any disrespect, nor is it to just have a good time. Rather the purpose of what we are doing is to connect ourselves to the joy of the resurrection. God's victory over death is a surprise twist.

If you are familiar with the story of the *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you will remember that the Witch thought she had won when Aslan the lion died on the stone table. But Aslan knew of deeper magic that would cause death to run backward if one who is innocent dies on behalf of another.

While the story of Aslan isn't meant to be funny, Christian theologians of past centuries saw the resurrection as God's last laugh over the devil. Churches in Germany in the 15th century celebrated the Sunday following Easter as the Easter laugh. Priests would tell amusing stories or jokes to make people laugh. Something similar happened on Easter Monday in the Orthodox tradition.

Today, we hope to worship God truly with joy and laughter in our hearts.

INVOCATION

Holy God,

You are a God of surprises, a God whose foolishness is wiser than human weakness. You have brought resurrection life out of the absurdity of the cross.

You smile whenever you create beauty and flourishing life in the chaos and randomness of the universe.

You are a God of laughter, laughing with Sarah and Abraham because of the child of promise.

Let us come into your presence with the gift of laughter.

Call us out of whatever tombs we inhabit, so that we can come out and find fun and joy as we participate in the resurrection. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God who is the source of all things, including joy and laughter,

We thank you for the many ways you give us the gift of laughing, whether through jokes, startling ideas of children, the quirks of the people we love, the hope of life everlasting.

Source of laughter, thank you for these many gifts. May we use our lives and gifts in ways that spread genuine laughter. Amen

MOSES MONOLOGUE – INTERPRETED BY LYNEL UNRAU

(Written by Caleb Yoder)

I get so tired of all this whining! (imitating complainers) “If only we had meat to eat! In Egypt we could eat all the fish we wanted. We could eat cucumbers, melons, onions, and garlic!”

I’ve had it! I led this ungrateful people out of Egypt. I led them across the Red Sea so that we escaped from the Egyptian army that was chasing us. I did everything the Lord our God asked me to.

Here in the desert, God has given us everything we need. True, we all have gotten tired of eating nothing but *manna* all the time. If you don’t know what that is, imagine if all you ever had to eat was lentils. Yeah, you get kind of tired of it, but it’s still better than being in slavery.

These people are just a problem. They have short memories. Now, they want to go back to Egypt where they were in slavery. *Slavery!*

After all of the trouble of getting out of Egypt, ten plagues and crossing the red sea, they are ungrateful.

(imitating complainers) “Oh, but the food was better there. It was free!”

What kind of toddlers are these people?

And then God gets all upset too, and we all have experienced what happens when God’s in a bad mood. As if I didn’t already know that these people are whiney! Does God think I’m their mommy? I didn’t give birth to these people!

So I says to God: “You know what, God? Why don’t you just put me out of my misery! Just take me out! I’m done!”

Well, God had *another* idea. That’s what always happens (sigh).

So God says, “Moses, I’m going to put some of the Spirit that is on you onto 70 elders, so that it’s not all on you.” OK, that’s fine. We’ll see if that helps. I’d be happy if everyone was a prophet, so I wouldn’t have to do everything.

God also tells me to tell the people that they’re going to get meat. Not meat for one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days. But meat for a whole month till it comes out everyone’s nostrils.

I says to God, “Do you know how many people we’re talking about? There’s 600,000 men. We could slaughter huge herds and capture all the fish of the sea and it wouldn’t be enough for these people’s appetite!”

I should-a known better than to question God. So you know what we got?

We got quail. Loads and loads of quail. Piles four feet deep of them birds extending for miles and miles. All blown in from the sea by God’s wind.

Some of us hung back by the camp. We could see this was a trap. Manna was sounding just fine to me! I started dreading the stench this would make a couple of days.

But that didn’t stop most of them bratty people. They all ran out, excited. Suddenly they were willing to work, spending all day gathering like 100 bushels each. Did they ever gorge themselves!

You know, that much quail is kind of a problem. You ever hear of avian flu? Yeah, it was kind of like that. Let me tell you, I don’t care what it is, when it comes back out, it don’t taste as good as the first time. Coming out of people’s nostrils sounds about right. Guess they got what they asked for.

(Sigh) I hope them people’s learned a lesson. Now I gotta figure out how we move camp when we’ve gotta step over all these rotting quail carcasses. Sheez!

BIBLICAL HUMOR – PASTOR CALEB

Numbers 11:4-33

As I said at the opening, the reason for the humor theme in this service is the century’s old idea that the resurrection of Jesus is God’s last laugh over evil and death. It might seem strange to go from that idea to the story of quail. What do quail have to do with this?

I picked this passage, because since I discovered it, I find so much humor in it. Maybe that’s me – it’s a little hard to get into the heads of the original audience to know for sure.

Some humor is just to get some laughs or groans. I think we have all experienced humor as a way to make a real, true, point. Sometimes humor disarms our defenses just enough to hear something that would be hard to hear.

The story of the quail is part of the bigger Exodus narrative. God used Moses to deliver the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The Israelites had to flee quickly on the night of Passover, when the angel of death passed over their houses. Moses led the people across the Red Sea to escape from Pharoah’s army.

Eventually God leads them to Mount Sinai, where Moses earlier received his call. Moses receives the stone tablets of the law that reveal how God is calling the people to live. God provided a miraculous food called manna, so that they would have something to eat while walking through the desert.

The quail story comes shortly after the Israelites have left Mount Sinai behind, as they slowly make their way to the promised land. They have made it through an awesome liberation from slavery, and yet this story reveals them to be extremely shortsighted, just as human-nature is shortsighted. Many of them, cannot forget the foods they could access in Egypt where they were enslaved. They complain to Moses that they want to be able to eat meat.

The passage is bookended by the word "craving." Verse 4 says (literally), "the rabble among them had a craving for a craving." Verse 34, at the end of the passage says that place came to be named Kibroth Hattaavah or "graves of craving" because there they buried the people with the craving.

The account has two alternating themes: the craving for meat and Moses' leadership. The people complain, and Moses despairs. God becomes irate at the people, and responds to Moses' despair by putting some of Moses' prophetic spirit on 70 elders to ease Moses' burden.

Meanwhile God sends a wind – wind is the same word as Spirit – that brings in heaps of quail in from the sea. Quail are a small bird that is part of the pheasant family, hunted as game in the Mediterranean. Depending on what the quail have eaten, there are cases where the meat is poisonous.

In the biblical story, the people who run after the quail – the reported amount translates to about 100 bushels! – end up getting sick. This might seem rather graphic. For me it brings to mind the ending of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Some of you in certain age categories might know what I'm talking about. I have memories going to a Junior High snow camp in a big van that actually had a little TV and VCR, and we watched *Indiana Jones* on the way.

At the end of the movie, the entourage finds an underground temple where the holy grail is found. Harrison Ford manages to get past a bunch of booby traps to a hidden chamber with a huge assortment of chalices.

The only problem is that drinking from the wrong chalice brings a curse. The Nazi spy drinks from a golden chalice that causes him to rapidly age with all the glories of the special effects of the 80s.

His assistant tries to flee with the real chalice, but the earth opens up and she falls to her death. The final tests reveal each one's moral character and true loyalties. The quail is likewise a test that reveals craving that gets in the way of the people's progress toward their own liberation.

The stories of the Exodus and Numbers are about this in-between time, between the miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt, wandering through the wilderness, on the way to the Promised land.

In the New Testament, we might relate this to the in-between time after high point of the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but waiting for God to bring about new creation on a full scale. The narratives of the Exodus story understand that liberation is not God's work alone, but that it requires a change in those who are to find freedom.

As Jewish scholar Avivah Zornberg puts it, commenting on the call of Moses, *“it seems that Moses, in a very intense way, is representing the problem that God faces in trying to redeem the people. It’s not only a problem with Pharaoh. It’s not only the persecutor. It’s a problem with the people and with Moses, that there is a kind of resistance to God’s redemption... there’s an unwillingness to open oneself up to an alternative reality.”*¹

In other words, Exodus calls for a process of growth with the people who are to find freedom.

Likewise, when we live into the Easter reality, season, we have to be deliberate about desiring this newfound freedom, rather than wanting to go back. We have to be willing to trust God in the ongoing challenges of being in this in-between place of living with the hope of resurrection and the down-payment of the Spirit, yet still in a broken world and with the brokenness of our own inner life.

I find the story of the quail to be poignant because of the humorous elements. Moses is a very human leader, becoming melodramatic as he asks God to take him out of his misery.

God takes up the challenge of giving people meat in an exaggerated quantity. The passage reports quail rained down 3 feet high for a day’s walk in any direction. People are reported as gathering 100 bushels worth each. Just imagine if we got that much snow.

The story is also deeply ironic. The people got way more than what they asked for, and it didn’t turn out well. Parents of young children can only dread what would happen if we said yes to every single request for screen time or sweets.

I can’t guarantee the original listeners would have had the same sense of humor as us. None of the commentaries I looked at addressed the apparent humor in this passage. Instead, I found it in a book all about biblical humor, but it was written by an engineer rather than a biblical scholar.

Humor varies from culture to culture. Often jokes are among the most difficult thing to translate. It is not uncommon in a cross-cultural situation to find everyone laughing, and you are puzzled by what’s funny. Yet, I doubt there is any culture without humor. Laughing is part of what it means to be human.

Is it possible that scholars are too good reading the Bible with a kind of seriousness that misses the humor? Is it possible that God uses humor and speaks to us through humor?

There are many examples of potential humor in the Bible:

- Both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the idea that they could have a child in their old age. The name Isaac means “he laughs” in Hebrew (Gen 17, 18, 21)
- When Balaam the “Seer” can’t see the angel in front of him, his donkey has to give him a talking-to (Numbers 22)

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/avivah-zornberg-human-becoming-between-biblical-lines/>

- At the Siege of Samaria, lepers turn into the heroes of the city when they decide they have nothing to lose and go out to the enemy camp, only to discover the enemies are gone and have left all their supplies and spoils (2 Kings 7).
- Jesus used humorous illustrations like having a “plank” in your eye (Matt 7).
- Jesus’ beatitudes contain ironic reversals. The poor in Spirit inherit God’s kingdom. The landless inherit the earth. Those who weep now will laugh (Matt 5, Luke 6)
- Paul preached such a long sermon that a young man fell asleep and fell out of a third story window (Acts 20:9)

Romans 12:15 tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn. We can’t be in mourning all the time, so we’re going to have to learn to laugh.

If you ask me, humor is present in the Bible and essential to how certain biblical passages are so memorable. Humor is part of the human experience like language, culture and music, even though it varies a lot from culture to culture. Doctors will tell you that laughing is good for your health. Laughter does us good even when we are dealing with something heavy.

If God speaks our language and moves us in music, surely God can use humor to bring us joy, get our attention, challenge us, and speak truth.

If we weren't so accustomed to Easter coming around year after year, we'd realize that the gospel story as a whole has humor, the biggest joke ever played on evil.

Today, let’s be of good cheer. Let’s look for how God speaks to us in even humorous ways (not at anyone’s expense, please!). As we go on our own journeys of liberation and resurrection, let us not give into craving more power, resources, and control. Let us rather trust that there is enough, and we are enough.

BENEDICTION

May the God of Isaac, the God of laughter

Christ, who for the joy set before him endured the cross,

and the Spirit of Joy go with you today and ever after. Amen.