

Pastor Daryl Diddle  
Thou Shalt Laugh

Sermon Series: *Laugh Therapy 1*

April 16, 2023

### Psalm 96 (NIV)

*Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. <sup>2</sup> Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. <sup>3</sup> Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.*

*<sup>4</sup> For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. <sup>5</sup> For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. <sup>6</sup> Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.*

*<sup>7</sup> Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. <sup>8</sup> Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. <sup>9</sup> Worship the Lord in the splendor of his[a] holiness; tremble before him, all the earth. <sup>10</sup> Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns." The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; He will judge the peoples with equity.*

*<sup>11</sup> Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. <sup>12</sup> Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. <sup>13</sup> Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.*

----

We're heading toward Psalm 96 today if you'd like to turn back there with me. Psalm 96.

Ah, the Sunday after Resurrection Day. On Easter, we have this high-soaring worship service, in every way, and then the next week, things – including attendance numbers – go back to normal.

And then, on top of that, as we look at today's message title, *Laugh Therapy*, you might think we've truly gone from the sublime to the ridiculous.

But I want to assure you, laughter is *not* ridiculous.

The truth is, I've thought about doing a series like this for years – ever since I read Don Demaray's book, *Laughter, Joy and Healing*.<sup>1</sup>

I might say, though, I didn't read it by choice.

Don died in 2015, but he was a part of this church for decades and was also a long-time professor of homiletics (the fancy word for preaching) at Asbury Seminary. He was *my* preaching professor, in fact, and among the many things I learned from him is that one of the benefits of being a professor *and* an author is that you can make students buy your books.

That's how I was coerced to read – I mean, that's how I came to read – this book.

I'd imagine it can be a challenging thing for some to preach to their preaching professor. But it never was for me, really, with Don, because he treated me rather like a son. He treated me just like a parent treats a child.

Parents, you know how that goes...

When a child does something irresponsible or unwise, the parent is quick to say, "I can't believe he did

that or I don't know where he learned that. Not from me, that's for sure!"

Or they might look at their spouse and say, "He got that from your family, not mine."

Or, to put a theological spin on their kid doing something dumb, a parent might say, "Well, there's free will for you." I've noticed that even the most hard-shell Calvinist believes in free will when their kid does something dumb.

But, if a kid does something great, the parent says, "You see that? That's good parenting right there – good DNA (from my side of the family) and good parenting!"

Don taught me many things through the years, but one was the importance of humor in communication.

When done well, humor is not just enjoyable to everyone, it's also an effective tool for disarmament.

Humor helps people relax, and when we are relaxed, we're more open in general, and we're more open, specifically, to hear the speaker's underlying message.

To be honest, almost always after I preach, though I'm typically fairly confident about my theology and getting the core message across, I almost always wish I'd used more humor.

Because God's creation of laughter is a very good thing.

In addition to its benefits in communication, it's therapeutic, in fact, in many ways.

One is that laughter, physically, is great exercise.

It was either journalist Norman Cousins or psychologist William Fry (who, by the way, is said to be the father of *gelotology*, which is the study of laughter) – one of those guys, and I can't say for sure because it's attributed to both of them – one of them once said, "Laughter is like internal jogging."

Physically speaking, laughter is very good for your heart.

Did you know that it takes about three minutes of vigorous rowing exercise to double your heart rate, but vigorous laughter can do it in about 20 seconds? And unlike vigorous rowing can be, laughter is not usually fatal. As of 1987, there was only one documented instance of a person dying of laughter.<sup>2</sup>

Hearing that, I'd imagine some are thinking right now, "Hey, forget that gym membership. I'm gonna grab me a bag of chips and watch some comedy instead!"

Well, it doesn't work quite like that, but listen to what laughter can actually do.

Laughter exercises the lungs, which helps us breathe better, which oxygenates our blood more efficiently. That's why our faces turn red when we laugh: it happens

<sup>1</sup>Donald E. Demaray, *Laughter, Joy and Healing*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1986.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1987-04-22-8701310020-story.html>

to us all, but you really notice it on fair skinned people. That's all those little capillaries just under the skin getting happy.

A respiratory therapist once said that the best thing you can do for a person who is resistant to therapy is to tell them a joke. Because then, when they laugh, they usually start coughing, and their coughing dislodges the mucus plugs that often cause infection.

Laughter actually exercises lots of muscles, some of which are rarely exercised apart from laughing. And then after laughing, those muscles are markedly relaxed, which is also great for relieving tension.

Laughter also helps us stay mentally alert because it stimulates the production of adrenaline, norepinephrine and dopamine, which work to stimulate the nervous system and create greater mental sharpness.

In other words, we can get smarter and stay smarter longer if we'll laugh more.

Recent studies have shown that laughter also works to enhance our immune systems, reduce blood pressure, protect against complications of diabetes and even increase our pain tolerance.<sup>3</sup>

One 2016 study of 21,000 people found that those who laugh every day were significantly less likely to develop heart disease.<sup>4 5</sup>

Laughter has also been shown as a method of reducing stress, and unlike other methods that many people turn to these days, laughing is low risk, low calorie (it actually burns calories), and it's entirely moral and legal.

So, see, you grumpy, unhappy people who never laugh, you're just hurting yourselves in lots of ways!

Now, in response to all of this, some of our more somber brothers and sisters would say, "But what is there to laugh about? Look around! The world's a mess; our nation's a mess; my family is broken; my health is not good," and on and on.

To which I would say, "All that may well be true, but how much more, then, do we *need* to laugh?"

The fact is, the world has always been troubled, ever since Eden.

Through the ages, nations have come and gone; they have risen and fallen.

Through the ages, families have been broken. Even the families of Scripture were broken – and broken badly! You can hardly find families today that are any more broken than were the families of Adam and Noah and Jacob and Lot and David and on and on.

And you know, though our health might truly suffer, the fact is, we already live longer than nearly anyone ever has in the history of the world – at least since the flood.

Difficulties and tragedies have always been with us, and yet the Bible is filled with commands to be cheerful and hopeful and peaceful and to rejoice!

Joy is one of the most common words in the New Testament.

How to account for that?

Maybe God knew exactly what we'd need the most in order to thrive here.

Maybe God really does know what's best for us.

Like this psalm here, Psalm 96.

Right off the bat, the psalmist writes, "Sing!"

God says we are to sing.

We might say, "Well wait a minute, you don't know my situation. My life is hard, and it's not normal. It's not natural to sing when we're down or when things are hard or when things are uncertain or when we're in pain."

And it's quite true that in those times, singing is one of the last things we feel like doing.

But you know, the honest truth is, the psalmist doesn't seem to care. He doesn't seem to put much stock into our feelings.

Come to think of it, the Bible, in general, doesn't.

Now, that's not to say God is cold or calloused or unfeeling toward us – not at all.

It is just that God knows that we can't order our lives according to our feelings, because feelings are not always trustworthy. Our feelings do not always accurately describe the whole picture of reality.

The fact is, sometimes we *have to act* – sometimes we have to do things – in order to take command of our feelings.

If we let the way we feel run our lives, the fact is, more often than not, on the whole our lives would get worse – not better.

That's one reason we have to do as Scripture tells to do, even when we don't feel like doing it – because our acts of obedience to God can change how we feel.

The objective can change the subjective.

That's one reason the psalmist says to sing.

And why sing?

Well, in this case, song is an expression of deep-seated truth about God, so it's right and good to sing just because of who God is.

In other words, God, simply by being God, can command us to sing – and to sing about Him – for no other reason than because He's God.

But it also just so happens that singing about God has the capacity to lift *us* up, even as we do it!

Now of course, song can express a full range of emotion.

But most often, song, and especially song about God, is a musical expression of laughter.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.thealternative.org.uk/dailyalternative/2021/5/16/laughter-is-like-internal-jogging>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S096522991830030X>

<sup>5</sup>*Laughter is the Best Medicine? A Cross-Sectional Study of Cardiovascular Disease Among Older Japanese Adults* Kei Hayashi<sup>1</sup>, Ichiro Kawachi<sup>2</sup>, Tetsuya Ohira<sup>3</sup>, Katsunori Kondo<sup>4,5</sup>, Kokoro Shirai<sup>6</sup>, and Naoki Kondo<sup>7</sup>, 2016

It's the combination of joy and happiness and praise and peace all set to tune, because the subject of our singing, God, is the One who brings joy and happiness and peace and every other good thing into our lives. Singing of Him reminds us of that and lifts us up and lightens our load and confirms in us those larger, greater truths that bring order and structure to our lives and plans.

The objective shaping the subjective in our lives, you see?

In most ways, singing *about* God and singing praise *to* God are the same as laughing.

When God says, "Thou shalt sing," He might as well be saying, "Thou shalt laugh."

Because the One we sing of is the all-powerful source, the all-knowing and all-seeing bringer of every good thing, for now and for all eternity.

What could possibly bring us down when that God is our God?

What possible reason could there be not to be happy and joyful and peaceful when *that God is for us*?

This was the message of the Psalmist here.

You see, in the ancient Near East, there was no such thing as separation of church and state. Nations were both political and religious communities, so the main questions that were considered from nation to nation were "Which God is your God?" and "Which God rules the others?"

So, to say that the Lord, Israel's God, *reigns*, which is exactly what this psalm is declaring, is to say that none of the other gods do.

This psalm, and many like it, is simply a declaration in song that Israel's God is the God who rules the others because He is the One who made the world, and so the stability and reliability and dependability of the earth itself speak of God's power.

Because God is stable and reliable and dependable, the earth is stable and reliable and dependable, and so life does not need to be lived in anxiety. We have the freedom to rejoice and relax and laugh because of who God is.

Let me say that there are some camps of environmentalists that need to understand this today.

Taking responsible care of the earth is good and right. God *requires* that of us, and certainly humanity hasn't always done a good job of that – of tending the garden.

But there are some in our world who are living life with much anxiety about that. There are some who are very much worried, who cannot rejoice, who cannot laugh, because they live in this constant state of fear.

God says there is no need for that.

Here, the psalmist tells even the elements of the world to rejoice before the Lord. Verse 1 there, "*Let the whole earth sing.*" Verse 11, "*Let the heavens be glad, let the earth rejoice, let the sea and everything in it praise, let the fields and the crops and the trees praise the Lord.*"

All of this is saying that God is in charge, and because of that we are free to celebrate and rejoice.

Because God is God, we can be lighthearted.

Because God is God, we can sing.

Because God is God, we can laugh.

Yes, parts of life can be hard, very hard at times. But remembering who our God is gives us a freedom and a buoyancy and a cheerfulness that we need, and that, frankly, our world needs to see in us.

This is something of where the Apostle Paul was heading in Romans 8, where He wrote, "Yes there are these hardships and difficulties in life, but still, for those in Christ – for those who follow Jesus, *'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?'*"

Verse 35, "*Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*"

In a broken and imperfect world, God, in Himself and in Jesus His Son, provides us reason to laugh.

And so, we should. It's therapy for our souls.

It's a way of reminding ourselves, "God is God and we are not," and that *not only* glorifies God, it *helps us*.

Just as God designed.

I mean, it's no accident that we are physiologically able to laugh. God made us to do it, and He's given us every reason to, and so we should – we can.

One day a group of scientists got together and decided that humanity had come a long way and no longer needed God. So, they picked one of their number to go and tell God that they were done with Him.

The scientist walked up to God and said, "God, we've decided that we no longer need you. We're to the point where we can clone people, manipulate atoms, build molecules, fly through space, and lots more. So why don't you just go away and mind your own business from now on?"

God listened very patiently and kindly to the man, and after he was done talking, God said, "OK, but before I go, how about we have a human-making contest, just for fun?"

The scientist replied, "Okay, we can do that."

"But," God added, "we're going to do this like I did back in the old days with Adam."

The scientist nodded, "Sure, no problem" and bent down to pick up a handful of dirt. But God stopped him by saying, "Oh, no, no – you go find your own dirt."

Will you trust that God is God – enough to laugh, to rejoice, to sing?

Believe it: we can!

And it would be so good, in so many ways, if we would.

Closing Prayer: Father, thank You for the gift of laughter: this response You created in us that does so many good things, but maybe more than any, reminds us, especially when things are hard, that You are God. It reminds us that You are on the throne of this universe, and nothing escapes Your notice. You are sovereign over the affairs of

our world, and You deeply love each of us – enough to send your Son to die for us.

Let us learn all these things so certainly that we can live lives of laughter as we follow You with all our hearts. Amen.

Closing Song: *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee*

Benediction: A department store salesperson noticed a little boy standing at the bottom of the store escalator, staring at the handrail – wouldn't take his eyes away.

She approached the boy and asked, "Son, are you lost?"

The boy replied, "Nope, I'm just waiting for my gum to come back."

Now there is sure and strong faith.

Let's go into our world with a laughter and joy that reveals that sort of faith in Christ – in what He's already done and in what He has yet to do.