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 June 15, 2008
 Genesis 18:1-15

Genesis 18:1-15 ^{NRS} The LORD appeared to Abraham¹ by the oaks² of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² 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. ³ He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on -- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures¹ of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ 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. ⁹ They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Is Anything Too Hard for the Lord?

It is Father's Day today and I had every intention of preaching a Father's Day sermon. I thought through all of the fathers in the Bible and considered what positive qualities I could draw on. Finally I settled on a story about Abraham, the prime example of a father with faith (plus it was the lectionary reading). But as I began to study the passage that Nereida read for us, I began to realize that it was really about Sarah. Don't get me wrong; there are principles for fatherhood in this passage, especially as fatherhood relates to hospitality. And God as the heavenly Father acts in this story as the one who promises and eventually delivers the gift of a child. But I guess you could say the Spirit hijacked my Father's Day sermon and turned it into a Parents' Day sermon. Fathers, don't be angry- we honor you on this day, not just with a new tie for your collection but also with our love and support. We also want to especially honor, as we did earlier in the service, one of our fathers with faith in our church, John McGraw, who passed away this week.

There is one phrase in this passage in Genesis 18 that caught my attention. In verse 12 after the three visitors come to Sarah and Abraham and they're rushing around to prepare food for them and they repeat the promise that they are going to have a child, it

says that Sarah laughed. Before we go any further into this story and all that's going on here, I'd like for us to think for a few moments about laughter. There are many different reasons that we laugh. Sometimes we laugh when we see something that is out of the ordinary or absurd. Sometimes we laugh at the expense of someone else's confusion or distress, which is ok when it's a movie but not when it's real life. But there are even differences in the ways and reasons that we laugh at movies. The way one would laugh about *Forrest Gump* is not the same way one would laugh at *Dumb and Dumber* (but I'm going to assume since we're in a church that no one here has seen either of those movies).

We might laugh out of bitterness if we've been disappointed. Sometimes we laugh when we're nervous. A friend of mine adds a little laugh to every comment she makes, whether it's a joke or not. I'm not making fun of her for it, it's really an endearing quality.

I have a relative who does magic tricks as a hobby. Occasionally at family reunions he'll take out his equipment and put on a show. He'll promptly make fools of us by picking the right card or multiplying foam balls or handkerchiefs right in front of our eyes. But our unvarying response is to laugh. We laugh because the way we think things are, the way things look, is not the way things actually turn out to be.

I realized something about myself not too long ago. When I am uncomfortable with a situation or in a relationship with someone, I do all that I can to bring it to a point where I can laugh about it. This might require making a joke or speaking in an accent or doing something silly. Christy thinks that this is the youngest-child clown syndrome coming out. Maybe I'm a co-sufferer of youngest-child syndrome with Pastor Leonard. I don't know—I just know that laughter for me is a way to relieve the tension of a situation or for me to cope with a strained relationship with someone.

Then there's also another kind of laughter that comes from deep inside us when we're overcome with joy. I laughed like this when I asked Christy to marry me and she actually said yes.

I say all this to say that laughter can mean a lot of different things. I've often heard this story of Sarah laughing as a negative action that displayed only her doubt and disbelief. I'd like to suggest that her laughter was more than just doubt—it was one step, one necessary part, on her path from despair to hope. Laughter, for Sarah, was the link between the reality that she knew – that in all her 99 years she was unable to have a single child—and the promise that she had received from God—that she would have a son, long after her child-bearing years had passed.

For now let's return to the beginning of our passage. Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent and it says it was the heat of the day. Let's say it was a day like this past Monday, and his AC unit is not working. And three visitors show up in the heat of the day, and he has no idea who they are, but he starts running around and Sarah makes bread for them and he slaughters a calf and he feeds them a feast. This is a pretty elaborate description of all that he does for them, but I think it's important because the story is emphasizing Abraham and Sarah's hospitality.

Think about it: if three strangers showed up at your door on Monday afternoon, would you have taken the rent money and, with sweat dripping off your face, run out to ACME and picked up some T-Bone steaks and shrimp kabobs and brie cheese? I know I wouldn't have. But here we have Sarah and Abraham showing remarkable hospitality

toward these three visitors who are far from home. In their traditional society, hospitality was very important. They almost take it for granted that this is what you do, that one treats the stranger and the enemy with the same kindness one would give to family.¹ And the reason for this in Scripture is that God is first hospitable to us, in giving us life and food and water and all that we need. So Abraham and Sarah's hospitality to the three men is an image of hospitality to God. This is why the distinction between the three men and God in the story is blurred. In fact, it seems to keep jumping back and forth, sometimes referring to the visitor as the Lord, and sometimes as three men.

These kinds of visitation narratives were fairly common in the ancient world. In some of them, the visitors would test the hospitality of the hosts in order to see if they deserve to be given fertility. This is not the case in this story- a child has already been promised to Sarah and Abraham.²

So after all the rushing around and baking and grilling and chowing down (and Abraham doesn't even sit with them, he kind of stands back and watches them eat), then we come to the point of the visit. The visitors ask where Sarah is, and Abraham says, "She's there in the tent." Clearly the tent is within earshot. The visitors must know that Sarah can hear everything they say.

So why do they address Sarah indirectly through Abraham, instead of speaking to her directly? There may be a couple of reasons. In that culture male visitors would not address the wife of one's host. So the visitors found a way to communicate with Sarah that was not rude to Abraham. But a second reason may be that at this point God and Sarah are not on the best of terms. And sometimes when we're angry with someone we don't want to address them directly. We might say to someone else, "Tell so-and-so I said this" even though they're right there. I'm reminded of one of my favorite episodes of the Simpsons, where the daughter Lisa becomes a vegetarian and destroys her father Homer's cookout. Homer decides he's not talking to Lisa and the scene goes something like this:

Homer: Marge? Since I'm not talking to Lisa, would you please ask her to pass me the syrup?

Marge: Dear, please pass your father the syrup, Lisa.

Lisa: Bart, tell Dad I will only pass the syrup if it won't be used on any meat product.

Bart: You dunkin' your sausages in that syrup, homeboy?

Homer: Marge, tell Bart I just want to drink a nice glass of syrup like I do every morning.

Marge: Tell him yourself, you're ignoring Lisa, not Bart.

Homer: Bart, thank your mother for pointing that out.

Marge: Homer, you're not not-talking to me and secondly I heard what you said.

Homer: Lisa, tell your mother to get off my case.

Bart: Uhhh, dad, Lisa's the one you're not talking to.

Homer: Bart, go to your room.

The point is that when we're not on the best of terms with someone, we might address the other indirectly, just as God did to Sarah in this passage. But why would there have been a barrier between them? If we look at where Sarah has come into the picture up to this point, we might begin to understand. Sarah is uprooted from her home when God tells Abraham to leave his country and become a wandering pilgrim. When

¹ J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*.

² Eugene Roop, *Genesis*, 125-27.

they arrived in Egypt Sarah was taken against her will to be a wife of Pharaoh, and the only defense offered by Abraham was to “say that you are my sister.” Then God promises to make a great nation from their descendants. But Sarah can’t get pregnant. In desperation she asked Abraham to try to have a child with her slave girl Hagar, and he did. But no child came to Sarah. Slowly she got older and older, long past the age when it was even possible to have children. We can begin to see why Sarah may not have been on speaking terms with the God who had promised to bless her with a son.

This promise was not a new one. It had been promised to Abraham in the chapter before. The focus in this announcement of the promised son is not so much that the visitors are giving any new information. The focus is rather on Sarah’s response. We can understand why she would respond with a bit of sarcasm to the idea that she would be bearing children. She is already way beyond menopause. I won’t get into sex education here (I’ll let that up to the public school system or to parents, depending on your political affiliation). Let me just say that we all know it takes two. It was probably commonly assumed in the ancient world, just as it is in many parts of the world today, that if a couple can’t have children it’s because of the woman. But this is not always a true assumption, and Sarah knows it. That’s why her response to the promise of a child questions Abraham’s ability as much as her own. She says to herself, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” It’s not just Sarah’s problem; it’s Abraham’s as well. And Sarah’s response is exactly the same as Abraham’s, in the chapter before. She laughs.

Suddenly in the story the visitors are not the three men, but God. God responds to Sarah’s laughter with a question, “Why did Sarah laugh?” Let me remind you of the different kinds of laughter that we thought about. There was laughter at something absurd or out of the ordinary. There is laughter at something slapstick or about seeing a story character in a position that we would not want to be in ourselves. We might laugh when we’re nervous or when we’re uncomfortable or to diffuse a situation. And then there’s laughter that comes from excitement or joy deep inside us.

So when God asks the question, “Why did Sarah laugh?” the text doesn’t really give us an answer. But I think that her laughter was not because she didn’t believe that God could do what God promised. I think her laughter was more like the kind brought out in us by my uncle who does magic tricks. We know what our eyes see, and we know what we should be seeing, and there’s a gap there. Magnify that little chuckle when we see our card turn up by about a million times- to a long desired, long promised child who would be the heir to a blessing, and we may get a little more of an idea why Sarah laughed. She knows what her eyes see- that she is childless and about to hit the triple digits. And she knows what she should see – that God was going to do something amazing. Sarah’s laughter was the road-sign on her path from despair to hope. Laughter was the link between the reality that she knew and the promise for which she hoped.

Then God responds to Sarah’s laughter with a second question, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” For those of us who know the whole story, it’s an easy question to answer. Of course nothing is too hard for the Lord. God can do anything. But what is easy to answer in theory is much harder in the everyday experience of life. For Sarah,

that experience was barrenness. The long-held desire to have a child that was promised by God slowly disappears as she and her husband slip beyond child-bearing years.

For Abraham and Sarah, the powerful promise of God outdistances their ability to receive it. Faith is a scandal and a difficult thing, not a reasonable act that fits into a normal life. They are accustomed to barrenness, they are resigned to a closed future. They have accepted hopelessness as “normal.”³

And then comes the question from God: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” It is an open question that waits to be answered. It is the question that surfaces everywhere in the Bible. It is the fundamental question every person must answer. And the answer we give determines everything else. If we answer, “Yes, some things are too hard, impossible for God,” then we’re really not talking about God. We’re talking about us. We have decided to live in a closed universe where everything is stable, everything is reliable, and everything is hopeless.

But if our answer is “No, nothing is too hard for God,” then we entrust ourselves fully into God’s care. It’s not easy. It often means letting go of our own perceptions of what is possible. It means letting go of the tight control of our lives that we think we have. When we say “Nothing is impossible for God” we recognize that we don’t really have the tight control that we think we have.

In the end the question “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” is not just about the promise of a baby. It is about the impossibility of discipleship, the impossibility of faith, the impossibility of a new community. We have to recognize that our best efforts fall short of the gospel. But we have in the words of Jesus a new hope: “With humans it is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).

This doesn’t mean that everything we desire is possible. Not everything is promised. What is “possible” is characterized only as everything promised by God. God has promised to be faithful, to give us a future and a new community. God has not promised that it would be easy.

When he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus pleads with God, “Father, with you all things are possible” – just what he told the disciples. Knowing he was facing painful torture and death, Jesus prays, “Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Everything is possible to God—except one thing. The only thing that is impossible is the removal of the cup. What God will not do is promise victory over sin without the reality of suffering, hurt, and the cross. There is nothing casually triumphant about the statement that with God all things are possible. Because of the character of God, everything is possible for those who stay with God through the dark night of barrenness. For Sarah and Abraham, there’s no simple, painless way to receiving their promised heir.

God asks two questions: “Why did Sarah laugh?” and “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” I get the impression that Sarah did not even think about the answers. She avoids the questions by totally denying that she laughed at all. Had she stopped and considered the questions and the kind of God that she served, she might have realized that God makes space for our laughter. The story of Sarah and Abraham demonstrates that God works with and through people who laugh in doubt and in hope.⁴ Later we see that

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 159-161.

⁴ Eugene Roop, *Genesis*, 126-27.

God did indeed provide a son Isaac for them, and Sarah can finally laugh a different kind of laugh altogether, one of sheer joy.

What I want to say is, Don't be afraid to laugh like Sarah did. And when you do laugh, don't feel the need to deny it. God has promised his faithfulness, his presence, his Spirit, the fellowship of the saints, and resurrection through Jesus Christ. And when God asks you, "Why are you laughing? Is anything too hard for the Lord?," don't deny that you laugh. Tell God, "I'm laughing because what I see in my life—my failures, the brokenness in my family and in my spirit, the wrong that has been done to me and that I have done to others, the injustices of this world, the pain and the suffering—all of this stuff doesn't match up with the ultimate good that you have promised. That's why I'm laughing."

And our God is big enough to handle that. Remember, God works with and through people who laugh, as we inch along the road from despair to hope. Nothing is too hard for the Lord- God's promises will not fail.

Prayer: God of Sarah and Abraham, you are a God who makes promises. And you are a God who keeps your promises, even though the waiting may be long and the journey hard. Help us, like Sarah, to see the good that you have in store for us. And when the gap between our troubled present and your promised future brings us to laughter or to tears, give us faith. Keep us on the path from despair to hope in your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.