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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis III. Laughter and Hope

Genesis 18:1-15 1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks 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 measures 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."

Where to start with this story on this Fathers Day morning? Well, I have to say, that the first thing that strikes me is that if I had been Sarah, I would have laughed too, wouldn't you? Even if you had known these strangers were from God, I mean, c'mon: a promise of fertility to a 90 year old woman?!? If that's not enough to make you laugh.... And, by the way, don't unwittingly read this story as if it is **Abraham** who is faithful but Sarah who is somehow showing disrespect or a lack of faith. Because in the chapter before this one, there is a an almost identical story about God's visiting *Abraham* on the occasion of his 99th birthday. On that occasion God came and repeated his promise from 50 years before – when He had called Abraham and Sarah to go to a new land --

that by his 100th birthday Abraham will have a son, the first of what will be innumerable descendants. And then it had been Abraham's turn to laugh. Genesis 17:17 tells it this way: after God repeated that earlier promise, "*Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"*"

Good question! For, as I say, I think if I had been Abraham on that earlier occasion or Sarah in today's story *I would have laughed too*. For it would appear that God doesn't know a lot about human biology. After all, Abraham, the story tells us, is now one hundred years old and Sarah is ninety years old. And even though scholars aren't really sure of whether these ages are accurately portrayed – and folks just lived longer for some reason – or whether they were a way in that time of honoring the heroes of the story by adding to their years, it doesn't really matter. Because whatever their exact ages, the point remains nonetheless that Abraham and Sarah are old enough to have had very good reason for their laughter. I mean, think about it: first of all, they had to have been wondering whether God had forgotten about them. In fact, they were pretty sure God had forgotten about them and that at their ages they simply couldn't be the vehicles for such a promise. That's why at one point when God had been absent for so very long, Sarah told Abraham that she would like him to sleep instead with her servant Hagar and to get Hagar pregnant so that at least by some manner there would be a child to inherit all that Abraham and Sarah had worked for. (I told you that our "first families in faith" in Genesis have some rather earthy stories to tell!) I think that such a desperate action shows pretty clearly that Abraham and Sarah had given up on the promise that God had made to them, and that they felt like they needed to do something to guarantee their futures when children were the only form of retirement planning there was. You had children, in part, to care for you in your old age. So Sarah and Abraham, having given up on God, took matters into their own

hands. So the first reason that Sarah and Abraham laughed is simply because it seems that this God of grand promises is rather flighty in his follow-through!

And, as I said, the second reason that they laughed at this announcement that Abraham's centennial birthday would see him with a son by Sarah was that this God apparently just doesn't seem to know about biology. Did you hear how delicately but clearly the scripture put this point there in verse 11? *"It had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women."* Is God not aware of how all this works and what the biological requirements are for conceiving children? There can be little doubt as to **why** Sarah arranged for a surrogate mother in Hagar; she had reached menopause. And so no wonder Sarah and Abraham laughed. Wouldn't you?

Before we go on, though, let's stop for a moment and ask: why **do** human beings laugh? What's the purpose of laughter? Researchers who have studied such things tell us that, on average, people laugh between 15 and 18 times a day. In an infant's development, the ability to laugh – and to recognize laughter and respond to it in kind – comes long before the ability to use language. Barbara and I cherish a video of our then five-month-old grandson laughing uproariously as his mother gently lifted him up and down in that way that all babies seem to love. Evolutionary biologists say that a baby's cry and a baby's laugh are his or her only power over the adults in their lives whom they must depend on. But – oh my! – how powerful those cries and those smiles and that laughter can be. How many of you have watched a grumpy old guy suddenly cooing and making silly faces at a baby who is smiling at him? So what does this tell us about why we laugh? Well, it suggests we laugh as a way to **connect** with other human beings. And that is surely right. While it's not uncommon, of course, for people to talk to themselves, it's very uncommon for people to laugh to themselves. Laughing is social; it connects us to one another.

Now, of course, sometimes we laugh because something is just plain funny. Reams and reams of paper and gallons of ink have gone into attempts to analyze what it means for something to be funny. But mostly, these are not very successful studies. And, after all, what is less funny than a joke you have to explain?

Sometimes we laugh because sinking through the floor is not a physical possibility. There have been occasions when I put my foot so far in my mouth I didn't think I could extricate it; when I said or did something embarrassingly dumb. And because the floor wouldn't swallow me up, instead I laughed that hunched-shouldered laugh of embarrassment.

Sometimes we laugh because if we don't laugh, we'll cry. When Barbara and I moved from Indiana to California in the mid-90s, we couldn't sell our house in Indianapolis. So we rented it out. Now – news flash – trying to be a landlord from 2500 miles away was a poor idea. I remember that in the space of one week we got the word that the septic tank had collapsed, the sprinkler system had failed, the tenants were running an auto-repair business out of the driveway (which really made the neighbors happy), and that the tenants had sublet a bedroom to a friend whose hobby was keeping python snakes – whereupon the realtor told us that she wouldn't show the house anymore and pythons really didn't add to its appeal anyway. Each bit of news that week made us grimace but when the final blow came, we just laughed and laughed. If we didn't, we would have sobbed.

So, obviously, we human beings laugh for many, many reasons but if you were to try to find something in common amongst all those reasons it might be that we laugh when things are **incongruous**. Now, that's a two dollar word that simply means something isn't the way it's supposed to be. Something is out of place. Jumbled up. Incongruous. It's the reason that the sign on a business I know of in north central Indiana is funny: "*Veterinarian and taxidermist.*" The incongruity makes you wonder

whether you ought to take your dog there when he needs medical attention lest he become subject to a different kind of attention. Incongruous. It's the reason that we sneak a peek (even if we claim not to) at the headlines of those alleged newspapers there in the checkout line at Safeway: "Alien gives birth to Elvis clone."

Incongruous. Not where things are supposed to be, expected to be. Not the way that things should be; things out of place, unlikely, bizarre even. At such incongruousness, indeed we laugh! Or at the announcement to a woman no longer physically able to bear children that she will have a son. Incongruous; not the way things are supposed to be. Worthy of a good laugh at the impossibility of such a thing. But that is exactly where the good news of this story finds us. Did you hear the line in the story where God says this: "*Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*" I want you to notice two things about this line. First of all, it is a **question**, not a statement. And since it is a question, it requires a response, doesn't it? It's not just a rhetorical question, my friends, for in some ways it is THE question that every single one of us need to answer on those days when life's incongruities and seeming impossibilities would tempt us into laughing a laugh of derision, a laugh of skepticism, a laugh of despair even. It is a question we need to answer when we wonder if we can make a difference, when we are fearful because so much has changed, when we suffer loss and wonder how we can possibly move forward. It is a question that individuals and churches, both, need to answer when the incongruity of life hits us hard. "IS anything too wonderful for God?" Well, is it?

I said there were two things about this line that are important, and the second one is this: a large part of whether something is too wonderful for God or not, whether God's vision and hope and future can break through or not depends on whether you and I will **cooperate** with God's hopes. That is true in your life on those occasions when you are tempted to give up and laugh a laugh of sad resignation, and it is true in

our church's life on any occasion when we might be understandably tempted to laugh a laugh of despair in the face of change and loss. God gave us free will and that means, when you think about it, that we do indeed have the possibility of obstructing what God wants. God will not force a future on us. God will invite us to be faithful to that vision of what could be. God will call us to work at it. God will entice us to cooperate in bringing about a future that is full of life and hope and blessing.

And that's also exactly the choice that Abraham and Sarah faced there after those strangers visited them and revealed God's continued commitment that they would indeed have a son, incongruous and improbable as that seemed. Think about it: their laughter **could** have been the end of it; they **could** have in essence answered "yes, some things are impossible for God, thank you very much." But they didn't. They decided to both believe **and** to cooperate with God. What do I mean? Well, I want to put this both delicately but nonetheless clearly because it's important to the story and important to us: God's promise of a son to them was not the promise of an immaculate conception; God did not tell Sarah that He would Himself cause Sarah to miraculously become pregnant. No, he said that in a "year's time" Sarah would have a son – and, my friends, this means that Abraham and Sarah needed to believe that promise so much that they themselves cooperated doing what you do to conceive a baby. I don't need to be more explicit than that; you catch my point. After all those hard years, years in which they had been so desperate that Sarah had even sent her husband to another woman's bed, they had to decide to risk the vulnerability of intimacy once again. That could not have been easy! But whatever fears and vulnerabilities they felt, the point is that they indeed chose to believe and they chose to cooperate and they chose therefore to act as if indeed their actions would help bring about God's promise.

It's the choice in front of us on this morning and every morning, our choice as a church and as individuals: when **we** face life's incongruities and seeming impossibilities,

when fear would try to immobilize **us**, when sadness would seek to stop **us** in our tracks – we too have the choice to laugh sadly and say “no, some things are just impossible” or to say “yes, with my help, with our cooperation, God can do far more than we ever imagined.” My friends, I would leave you with a gentle challenge this week. Ask yourself what it is in your own life where you are tempted to disbelieve, where you are tempted to settle, where you are tempted to decide that some things just cannot be and where you are therefore inclined to laugh sadly. And when you have identified that spot or those places in your life, then ask God in prayer to show you just one small way that you can seek to cooperate with how God’s wanting for you a life more abundant and blessed. Ask God how your sad laughter can be turned into peals of joy, squeals of delight. For that’s what God wants for you, for me, for our church as we seek in a new era to be faithful and true to God’s promise to bless us always. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Absolutely not, if we will but follow and assist the Lord. May it be so. Amen.