

## P2A 2023 Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)

About nine months ago a group of pastors and I were sitting around my kitchen table, eating French toast and planning the next synod youth event. We lamented that although the youth events are important and worthwhile, they don't even give us two full days to make an impact. Someone, it might have been me, said how much better it would be if we could prepare students for the event and then send them home afterward with resources to continue the conversation. "What, like you want to write a book?" And we all laughed. Well, this is the book. This is not self-promotion but proof that God still does absurd things even, or maybe especially, when we laugh at the prospect.

This summer the lectionary gives us a fast fly-over of the saga of Abraham and Sarah, because there is just too much to their story for us to cover it all on Sunday mornings. Last week we heard God tell Abraham to leave his country and his kindred to go start his own family in what would eventually become the Promised Land. We skipped several chapters to get to today's reading, about 25 years of their lives, but what hasn't happened yet is the birth of their child. On multiple occasions, Abraham has cried out to the Lord, complaining that God hasn't given them even one of these descendants who were to number as many as the stars. Abraham had also laughed at the audacity of God's promise, asking rhetorically if such a thing could even be possible. It is unclear whether Sarah was present any of the times that God spoke to Abraham; we don't know if she heard these promises herself, and if not, we don't know what or how much Abraham shared with her. At least this time we know that Sarah hears the promise herself, even if it's only because she's listening in on the conversation.

The visitors to Abraham's tent are fascinating characters. Abraham sees three of them, yet the story refers singularly to THE LORD, a detail that has been used to suggest this is the Trinity visiting with Abraham. Whether we understand them as an incarnation of God, or as messengers of God, Abraham offers them the kind of gracious welcome that a righteous person in his culture was honor-bound to give. After receiving Abraham's hospitality, they again reiterate the promise that Abraham has heard several times before, that in due season, Sarah will have a child. Although they do not address Sarah directly,

this time she hears—or overhears—God’s promise not relayed through Abraham, but right from the source. And when she hears this promise for herself, she laughs.

We don’t know what Sarah’s laugh sounded like or what it really meant. Maybe she’s laughing a deep, shaking, uncontrollable laugh, amused at the absurdity of the promise. Maybe she’s joyfully relieved that it’s finally coming true. Maybe it’s a bitter, ironic laugh because she thinks she’s being cruelly teased, insult added to the injury of years of disappointment. Maybe she’s laughing nervously because she believes that this time it really will happen. Maybe it’s an embarrassed giggle: if you read closely—she doesn’t mention the birth or raising the child; she wonders if she’s going to enjoy the conception. God asks why Sarah laughed, if anything is too wonderful for the Lord. And although Sarah, out of fear, tries to deny her laughter, God, who of course knows, says, *Oh yes, you did laugh.*

Although the full account of Genesis makes us wait another few chapters, the lectionary skips ahead to where we hear that God didn’t punish Sarah for her laughter, as she may have feared God would, but God did for her what had been promised. As we said of Abraham last week, this is less a story of Sarah’s faith, either in God or in herself, than it is a story of God’s faithfulness to us. Sarah’s laugh could be interpreted as skepticism, but even if it is, God does what God promises anyway. It also bears mentioning that this is not a story of God giving us whatever we want, or even of God giving us what we want if we’re patient enough to wait a really, really long time for it. I wish that was what this story was about. But it’s not. This is a story of God making a promise—a seemingly absurd, impossible promise—and making it happen. This is a story of God keeping even the promises that make us laugh—laugh in disbelief, laugh in pure joy, or laugh so that we don’t cry.

Sarah names her son Isaac, which is Hebrew for *laughter*, and in the end she credits God with bringing laughter to her and to everyone who hears her story. *Who would have ever thought...* she wonders, but of course, nothing is too wonderful for God. Let us listen, like Sarah did, so we can hear God call us to absurd possibilities. We may laugh—but then we better get ready to see what God can do.