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Year A  
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*O Lord our God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.  
Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may be obedient to your will and live  
always for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.*

## **YES, YOU DID LAUGH**

### **GENESIS 18:1-15**

Does Sarah laugh or not? God---or is it one of the men who appears to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre---says that she does. Sarah, embarrassed by the whole series of events, says that does not. Scripture, being the patriarchal narrative that it is, sides with God (or the man). Sarah laughs. God asks why, and by asking the question this way, God goes not give Sarah a chance to deny laughing, but she does anyway. Well behaved women rarely make history. She exclaims, "I did not laugh." An editorial note follows: "For she was afraid." Then God decrees, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Of what is Sarah afraid? Is she afraid of the strangers who have come to town that Abraham, whose behavior has been erratic recently, is choosing to worship? Remember: In the story of God's call to Abram and Sarai, God speaks directly to Abram. Now that God has changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah, suddenly God seems distant. Maybe that is because Abraham and Sarah associate God with the comfort of home, and this quest for the Promised Land is increasingly uncomfortable, un-homelike. No, God is not abandoning them, but being visited by human beings has to feel like a let-down after encountering God face-to-face. Abraham has answered the door to find Jehovah standing there. Now all there is are Jehovah's witnesses!

If Sarah is convinced that the strangers among them were sent by God, then she may be afraid of their disapproval. Baking is difficult enough without being rushed by a crazed patriarch who,

according to Genesis, “hastens into the tent and says...‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it and make cakes.’” Then, as soon as he says this, he is off to pasture in search of a fatted calf, tender and good, to give to the servant to prepare in celebration of the arrival of honored guests (and here we thought Luke’s story of a prodigal son was an original). What would it be like at your home or mine if we thought that the Lord (or at least the Lord’s staffers) was coming for dinner tonight? Feelings would oscillate from fear and trembling to fear and loathing.

Maybe Sarah is afraid of being pregnant. Great is the mystery of faith; great are the mysteries of pregnancy, especially to those of us for whom childbirth is a spectator sport. At this stage in Sarah’s life, she has about the same chance of having a baby as I do! Scripture says this delicately; and I do not know about you, but I find the extent to which Scripture’s editors are willing to go to sanitize the story humorous. The message is concealed by the announcement, as one of the men predicts, “I will surely return to you in due season.” Season? What season? Are we being agricultural here? Not exactly. The harvest in question is a human being. Even though it takes a while, the man finally says clearly, “Abraham, your wife Sarah will have a son.”

Now here is a question worth pondering: If Sarah is not eavesdropping, how does she find this out? To us, this plot seems absurd (or at least I pray that it does). Sarah is the patient, and yet the gynecologist here chooses to diagnose her through Abraham. Meaning: If Abraham chooses not to share this information with her, she will not know that she is expecting until she is deep into the process when she has that “ah ha” moment and concludes that it is not those honey-laden snacks that account for her weight gain.

To a woman whom Scripture describes as “old, advanced in age,” for whom, “it has ceased to be...after the manner of women.” Oh, here we go again. Another Messianic secret: If Sarah does not laugh, I may not know that she is as the New Testament says “with child” (or that she is going to be “with child”) until the baby begins to bulge through her clothing.

“At last,” she cries, “I will have pleasure!” In Scripture, she states this as a question, but the question functions as an exclamation: “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” If she may trust what is being said outside of the tent, the answer is, “Yes! Yes, you will have pleasure!” Now before we speculate on why she has not had such pleasure in the past---before we start laughing at Abraham---let me explain the linguistic twist in this part of the story. Pleasure, as it is spoken of here, in Hebrew, refers to Eden, to “in the beginning,” to the place created to bring glory to God for God’s pleasure. Remember the first question of the Westminster Catechism: What is the chief end and aim of human existence? To glorify God and enjoy God forever! Remember God’s promise to Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...in you all families of the earth shall be blessed.” To be a family, much less a great nation, involves involving other people in the blessing, and that may come through union with another (any other) or through childbirth. In Genesis, a creating God encourages the faithful to be creative, and often that translates into procreation. “At last,” Sarah cries, “I will have pleasure.” “At last,” God replies, “So will I.”

Even so, there are biological factors to consider. Since Scripture does not state it bluntly, I will: Sarah is post-menopausal. She has seemingly aged out of having babies, emphasis on seemingly, because in Scripture, things are not always as they seem. Grace trumps conventional wisdom time and time again in the biblical story. Noah built an ark during the dry season. Now Abraham and Sarah are starting a college fund. As exciting as this is, beneath the jubilation, there are doubts and fears. Being pregnant is physically demanding. So is raising an Isaac. Given the place to which Abraham and Sarah have been called, protecting and providing for that son is not without stress; and who is to say that God will not ask Sarah or Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? In fact, we know that God will. Of what is Sarah more afraid: life with a baby or life without one? God’s question to Abraham is even more useful than this

one, because it is rooted in God's life (as opposed to ours): Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Well, when you put it that way...of course not.

Why does Sarah laugh? Because she is afraid, and because she has a sense of humor: Is her laughter appropriate? Probably not in a story that cannot bring itself to say "pregnant," "fertile" or "post-menopausal," but in a world in which women struggle against being marginalized---against being pushed inside of tents---it seems appropriate. It seems appropriate in a world in which women find that they are pregnant when they would rather not be (and not pregnant when they rather would be). It seems appropriate to me, because what the Lord suggests to Abraham seems absurd. Laughing at absurdities translates into laughing at ourselves, because we are children of God's promises to Abraham, of God's promises to Sarah. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Certainly, we are not.

The subject of inappropriate laughter fascinates me, in part because I laugh often, in part because so much is caught up in laughter. Obviously, there is a big difference between laughing with (the subject of the comedy) and laughing at (the object of the comedy). In both instances, laughter is a form of cheering, either *for* a cause being championed or *against* a person or a work being objectified. Sometimes it is the situation (and not the laughter) that seems inappropriate. Do you laugh at weddings or funerals? I do, especially at funerals that serve as celebrations of robust lives for which all who are gathered there are grateful. Maybe that is why Sarah laughs. She is celebrating the absurdity that faithfulness brings, and in this celebration, there is life and life abundantly: life so abundant that she is bold enough to bicker with God. Sarah insists that she does not laugh, and God says, "Yes, you did," and the scene ends there. Somewhere, in distance, however, I hear God laughing. So is Sarah. So are you, and so am I. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever. Amen.