

“Is Anything Too Hard for the Lord?” Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7 (Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost, October 21, 2018)

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³ and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵ while I bring a morsel of 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 went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. 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 Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” ¹⁰ The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord 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 hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵ But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. ² And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” ⁷ And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

PRAY

We are working our way through the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis on Sunday mornings. We meet Abraham in chapters eleven and twelve, and as soon as he is introduced we read that God makes him a promise: that God would give Abraham a son, that through that son he would build a great and mighty nation, and then through that nation all the peoples on the face of the earth would be blessed. The big question, the dramatic tension, of the story of Abraham is: will God keep this promise? We made it through chapters 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17, and though the promise has been repeated it has not yet been fulfilled. Twenty-four years have passed between God giving the promise in chapter 12 and our text for today in chapter 18.

But in chapter eighteen we come to the climax of the story of Abraham. The dramatic tension is resolved. Abraham will have a son. Yet it's curious (and commentators have noted this for centuries) that in this climatic text God really isn't concerned with Abraham. Abraham is of secondary importance. God comes to talk to Sarah, his wife. Obviously Sarah has a role to play in the promise as she is to be the one who bears the child of the promise.

What does God say to Sarah? Let's look at our text for this morning and we'll see first, Sarah's unbelieving laughter. Second, God's gentle response. Third, our joyful hope.

First, Sarah's unbelieving laughter. Around noon one day Abraham, probably, is taking a nap. He's worked in the cool of the morning, he'll work again in the afternoon, but when the sun is high it's time for a midday siesta.

But he wakes up with a start and he sees three men standing in front of him, and immediately notices something different about one of the men. So much so that Abraham got up and ran to meet this man (remember, Abraham's 99 years old), bows at his feet, begs him to stay and eat, and prepares what ends up being a grand feast for him and his companions.

A fattened calf would feed dozens of people, but Abraham slaughters one just for these three. Three seahs of fine flour would make enough bread for dozens of people, but Abraham sets that much bread in front of these men. This is way more than they could possibly eat in a sitting.

Hospitality was very important in that culture. To refuse to care for a stranger in your home was as a serious breach of propriety. You always gave the best to your guests. But this goes way beyond the requirements of even Middle Eastern hospitality. This is a feast fit for a king. You could always judge the importance of a person at a banquet in antiquity by how much food was set before them. Now why did Abraham insist on a feast like that for these men?

Because somehow he knows one of these men **was** a king, and not just any king. We don't know how Abraham knows but he nevertheless knows this man is the King of Kings. This is the Lord Almighty, Yahweh, the God of the universe. After Abraham feeds these men, he stands in front of them, watching them eat, eager to hear the message the Lord will give him.

But as we've said, the Lord doesn't have a message for Abraham. He says in verse 9, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" Abraham says, "She's right behind us – in the tent." Sarah is close enough to hear whatever the Lord says next. "10 The LORD said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.'" Genesis 18:10a.

How does Sarah respond? By laughing, but her laughter is not the laughter of joy. "11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?'" Genesis 18:11-12.

Sarah's laugh is one of unbelief. She scoffs at God's promise of a son and says, "It can't happen. I'm *worn out*." In Hebrew that word has a particularly nasty connotation. It doesn't just mean that she's reached menopause. Verse 11 tells us that. In the ancient world the elderly

were treated with great dignity, but there's nothing dignified about the Hebrew word meaning "worn out." In other places in the Bible, that adjective is used of tattered, raggedy clothes or of prostitutes who have been used and passed around by men for years and years.

Sarah scoffs and says, "There's no way I can have pleasure. My lord is old." The pleasure she speaks of here is sexual pleasure. She's saying, "Abraham is old and hasn't touched me in years – how can I bear his child?"

Sarah has heard of this promise of a son for twenty-four years, and she certainly believes in the God who gives the promise. That is to say she believes he exists. We know that because when it's pointed out to her that she laughed, she lied and said she did not laugh because she was afraid of what God might do to her as punishment.

Sarah knows of the promise and she knows who the Lord is, but *she doesn't believe in the promise of a child*. She has no faith, and therefore life isn't worth living anymore. She wasn't suicidal, she was still able to function, but she had no hope of happiness. She couldn't have children, and in that culture that meant you were as good as dead. And she believed nothing could change that fact about her life – not even the Lord. She laughs at the Lord's promise.

Have you ever laughed the laugh of unbelief? I bet you have. In a room this size there's no telling how many people feel the same way as Sarah about something. You find yourself facing some situation in your life you think absolutely prevents your happiness. Like Sarah, you're still functioning, you're not about to do anything rash, but your life has gotten to the point where you don't have hope anymore. You're convinced things won't get better and you can't be happy. It can be with your marriage, with your children, with your loneliness, with addiction, with aging parents, or with your own health. As long as this situation remains the way it is (and you don't see how it could possibly change) you see no possibility of happiness.

And then you hear some promise in the Bible of God's goodness and his determination to bless his people, like Psalm 27, where David said, "I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! ¹⁴ Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!" Psalm 27:13-14.

You read that promise and others like it and you scoff and say, "No way. I just don't see any way I can look on the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living because this situation in my life is not going to get better. God either can't or won't fix this." Like Sarah, we've laughed at the promises of God.

Second, God's gentle response. What would you expect God to do when someone laughs at his promise like that? He's the Lord of the universe after all, he is the almighty creator, the mountains will crumble before his word will fail.

I'd expect him to say, "You little twerp. Don't you know who I am? How dare you question my promises!" I expect plagues and lightning strikes to punish those who doubt.

I hate to say it but I can get this way with my kids when they don't believe me about something. For example, one of my kids leaves their bookbag from school out in the car – out in the driveway – they didn't bring it in when they first got home from school. But now it's nighttime. And they come to me at 9PM and say, "Dad, I left my bookbag out in the car." I say, "OK, just go get it." "But Dad it's dark outside." "So what?" "I'm scared – will you watch me go to the car?" Now I know I should say, "Of course, honey, I'll watch you go to the car" but instead I try to reason with them. I say, "Listen, turn the outside lights on so you can see. You can take my flashlight [I've got one of those Foursevens flashlights that you can see from outer space]. And I promise – no one is out there who is going to get you. You'll be fine." But they don't believe my promise. They say, "I'm still scared." And I get frustrated. I think, "After all these years, why don't they just trust me?" I tell them, "No one is hiding in the bushes who's going to grab you and run off. Just go get your bookbag." But it doesn't help, so of course I end up getting up and watching my kids go to the car to get their stuff.

Now my children, in their defense, know I'm promising something that I can't deliver on. I can't really guarantee our yard is empty of bad guys.

But this is God. God can deliver on all his promises. Yet Sarah laughs at his promise. How does God respond?

As gently as he possibly could. He does rebuke Sarah, but only very mildly. When she lies about laughing at God's promise, God replies in verse 15, "Sarah, you know you laughed." But that's it – no wrath, no plagues, no lightning striking her down from the sky. Just a mild rebuke.

Here's what we need to know about God: he is not out to punish us for the weakness of our faith. If God was angry at us for our unbelief and wanted to make our lives miserable as punishment, he could do a whole lot better job of it than he's doing right now. We wouldn't wonder, "Is God mad at me for not trusting him?" No, we'd know God was angry with us. God's plenty big and strong to make it absolutely clear when he's not happy. We'll see that very clearly when we talk about Sodom and Gomorrah in a few weeks.

God is not out to get us. Instead, he is gentle in how he deals with us. I love Psalm 103, where it says, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. ¹⁴For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." Psalm 103:13-14.

Do you have doubts about whether or not God can keep his promises to you? Don't beat yourself up about it. God certainly isn't going to beat you up over it. Don't cower in shame and try to hide from God because of your unbelief. Instead, **go to him with your lack of faith.** Tell him you don't believe. Tell him, "I wish I could believe your promises, I wish I could have hope, but I don't right now – help me, God."

That's what Sarah did. I know it says in verse 12 that she laughed "to herself," but she was laughing to herself *in response to God's Word*. She had enough faith in God to listen closely to God at least try and wrestle with his promises.

Take God's promises and, if you don't believe them, at least wrestle with them the way Sarah did. My favorite illustration of this in the Bible can be found in Mark 9. A father has a son who is greatly afflicted by an evil spirit. The spirit made the boy mute, gave him seizures, and would cause the boy to throw himself into fire or water to try and destroy him. The father goes to Jesus and says, "If you can do anything for us, please have compassion on us and help us."

But Jesus says, "What do you mean 'if you can'? All things are possible for him who believes." And what does the dad say? Best prayer in the Bible: "Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'" Mark 9:24. The man doesn't really believe Jesus can heal his son, it's clear he doesn't have much hope, yet he at least has enough faith to go to Jesus and tell him about it.

You feel hopeless and desperate. You read the promises in the Bible and you can't help it, you don't want to do it, but you scoff and you say, "There's no way – I don't see any way that can happen for me." The best thing you can do is take your unbelief to Jesus and tell him, "I believe in you, Jesus – I only believe just enough in you to talk to you, but I believe that much. Please, Jesus, help my unbelief. I'm wrestling with your promises. Help me not to just believe in you in some abstract way but to believe that your goodness and your promises and your mercies apply to me right now, this day, this life. Help me see your goodness in the land of the living."

God is not going to strike you down for your lack of faith. He'll be gentle in his response because he loves to build up the faith in those who struggle with unbelief. But, positively, will he do anything about your hopeless situation when you wrestle with his promises? Yes!

Third, our joyful hope. Sarah laughed at God, she scoffed in unbelief at his promise that she would have a son, and yet what happened? In spite of it all, *God gave her a son!* "The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. ² And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him." Genesis 21:1-2.

God didn't let Sarah's unbelief keep him from blessing her, and here's what you need to know: *God is more ready to bless than you are to believe.* He loves to fulfill the hopes of his people.

Now, Sarah wanted a son and got a son. Does that mean that whatever it is you are desperately wanting to happen in your life God will give it to you? No. Sarah's child is a result of a specific promise God gave Abraham as a part of his plan to redeem the world. I'm sorry, but the lesson of Genesis 21 is not that if you want a child God will give you a child. I wish it could be that, but it's not. The lesson is not that if you want your husband to change and stop being a jerk God will fix him in one year, or that if you have cancer or need a new job give it a year and God will take care of it.

That's not the hope we have. What is it? One of my favorite verses in the Bible has to be Genesis 18:14. We read where God says, "Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." And that phrase "too hard" translates a particular Hebrew word that sometimes does mean "hard" but other times can mean "wonderful." I think that's an appropriate translation here – God hears Sarah's laugh

of unbelief and says, “Sarah, is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

In Judges 13:18, we read that an angel of the Lord appears to Manoah, the father of Samson, one of the great deliverers of Israel prior to the time of David and Solomon and the kings of Israel. Manoah asks the angel, “What is your name?” “And the angel of the LORD said to him, ‘Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?’” Same Hebrew word.

We read this name one more time in Isaiah 9:6: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” That’s talking about Jesus.

Our hope is not that anything specific will be done for us. Our hope is not that God will give us what we think we need to be happy; *our hope is that God has given us Jesus, and in him we have all we will ever need to be happy.*

Jesus Christ God is the ultimate child of the promise, and in him God is healing and redeeming the world. We by nature are God’s enemies. We’ve sinned against him and we’ve broken his law. We were made to honor him and build our lives around him but instead we’ve tried to build our lives around ourselves. And of course we’ve hurt one another – often. But rather than punish us God sent his son Jesus, who became a man and did not honor himself or build a life around himself. He never wronged anyone. He lived solely for the pleasure of the Father in heaven. But on the cross he died as a substitute for us so that God could forgive us of our sins and begin the process of healing in our lives and the world so that one day you and I will live forever in total happiness.

Now what do you call news like that? *Wonderful*. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? The answer is no, because he would go so far so as to send Wonderful himself to come and heal the world and reconcile us to him. Nothing could be more wonderful than that.

If you believe that news, do you know what you’ll do? You’ll laugh. That’s what Abraham and Sarah did. They named their son Isaac, which means “he laughs,” because now they knew in a way they’d never known before that God is more ready to bless than they were to believe.

How will you laugh, though, if Jesus becomes your hope? Three ways: *first, you’ll laugh at with joy at God’s provision*. “And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me ...’” Genesis 21:6a. Like I said earlier, in a room this size there’s no telling how many of you find yourself facing some kind of situation in your life that you think absolutely prevents your happiness. And he may not give you the help you think you need, the only help that you think could possibly soothe you and keep you from despair.

But I can promise you this: if you put your hope in Jesus one day you will be satisfied. “My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶ when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.” Psalm 63:5-7.

No one ever trusted Jesus with their lives and regretted it. I don't know how he'll bless you and you won't know how he'll bless you. But he will give you what you truly need, nourishing food on which your soul can feast even in the darkest times, and when it comes you'll laugh with joy.

Second, you'll laugh at yourself. You'll laugh at all the times you doubted God and his ability or willingness to provide for you. That's so much of the Christian life I think. This is the process of sanctification: doubting God, wondering if he even remembers you anymore, then finding that, once he again, he's supplied you far better than you could have ever expected. But you don't beat yourself up for how you doubted God and wallow in it – you just laugh at yourself and your silly unbelief. You learn not to take your doubts too seriously. They come with the territory, they do get progressively weaker as you experience God's provision, and one day when you see God face-to-face he will take them all away.

Third, you'll laugh even when other people laugh at you. Let's read the second half of verse 6: “And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.’” Genesis 21:6. I don't think “laugh over me” is the best way to translate verse 6. What does that even mean? I know it means to laugh “with” someone but not “over” someone.

Clearly, though, the Hebrew word means “over,” and I think the best way to understand it is Sarah saying “everyone will laugh *at* me.”

It makes sense when you think about it. You have a 90 year old woman breast-feeding – how ridiculous must that have looked? How ridiculous would she have looked when she's 93 and she's nursing Isaac at age three (and Isaac would have been nursed at least that long back then)? A ridiculous sight and people laugh but Sarah says, “Who cares? I belong to the Lord and he satisfies me.”

Friends, if you give your life to Jesus the world will laugh at you. They'll scoff at you. They'll say, “How in the world can you believe that stuff? Do you believe in unicorns, too?” Oh, they may not say it to your face but behind your back they will. They'll talk about what a fanatic you are.

If you are really determined to follow Jesus more people will laugh at you than laugh with you. But you won't care. You won't need the approval of other people anymore. Let them laugh. You know the Lord and he satisfies you.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Absolutely not. He's already given us Jesus, and in Jesus all the promises of God are fulfilled for his people. Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” When you believe that promise you'll find you can laugh no matter the situation you face. AMEN