

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Genesis 18:1-15, “Abraham & Sarah have Company”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 6/18/2017**

It’s Youth Sunday, folks. We’ve packed a lot into it,  
so I’m not going to belabor the message today.

If you’re a young person today, it’s more than likely your problems feel big.  
It’s easy to get the feeling that the problems you face at home,  
in your neighborhood, with your friends, or at school  
are bigger than anything else in your life.

Not only are your problems found in all those places I just mentioned,  
they also have the chance to be amplified thousands of times  
by being placed on the internet.

If you’re an unfortunate person like one of these people we’ve seen video clips of,  
your problem might even be around longer than you are.

If you’re not a young person (at least in terms of age –  
I know we’re all young at heart here!),  
it’s more than likely that your problems feel big as well.

You may have moved through a lot of things in life  
that have been quite demanding.

But now you’re facing medical concerns that could change everything.  
And you’ve lost loved ones—friends and family members.  
And you’re watching your own kids,  
grandkids, nieces or nephews deal with things  
that you don’t have any control over.

And everything would be fine if they would just listen to you  
but for some reason they don’t!

These are the kinds of situations where we say to ourselves with a laugh,  
“Am I ever going to find a way out of this one? I doubt it.”

Well in Genesis 18 we have a couple – in this case an older couple –  
who have a big problem. You see, they don’t have any children.  
And yet, back in Genesis 12 and 15,  
God has promised big things would come through them.

Nation sized things.

Years go by, but Sarah's tummy remains without child. Many, many years go by.

And then one hot afternoon, Abraham is catching some shade behind his tent-flap,  
when Yahweh pays them a visit.

This is what we're told in 18:1 – the LORD (this is the divine name YHWH),  
appeared to Abraham near the great oaks of Mamre.

But when the Almighty shows up, it's not through a massive thunderhead,  
a mystical vision or dream, a tornado of fire, or a burning bush.  
God comes by as part of a group of three travelers.

Now – hold your horses. It's easy for us to start saying, “It's the Trinity,  
this is proof, one God in three persons right here in Genesis!”  
But that is not at all the way the story was intended  
or understood for thousands of years.

Instead (just like with the Trinity) we have to recognize the mystery at play here.  
For an ancient Israelite, this is a dangerous and daring way  
of portraying God's up-close-and-personal delivery  
of an extremely important message to Abraham and Sarah.  
Abraham and Sarah have company, but not quite in a straightforward way.

Abraham hurries to greet these visitors, though he greets them with the singular,  
“my lord.”

From our perspective as modern Westerners, he seems anxious  
that they stay and show favor upon him.  
He sets things in motion, instructing Sarah to start on bread  
while he selects a calf and cheese curds and milk  
to be prepared for dinner.

But there is nothing extraordinary about this display.

In ancient Middle-eastern culture, hospitality to a traveling stranger was a virtue held in very high regard.

John Gibson notes that “even a member of a hostile tribe is entitled to become” a guest in the home.

So it’s unsurprising that hospitality and welcome into the home are offered to this group. They had no idea of the connection to the divine present in this party.

It’s for this reason that Hebrews 13:2 refers to them as “entertaining angels unawares.”

In due time, they eat together underneath a tree.

In verse 9 a question arises: Where is your wife, Sarah?

With this question, the pace of the storytelling slows considerably.

We are now given a moment-to-moment account of what happens under the tree as well as what happens within Sarah’s tent.

**“Where is your wife, Sarah?”** Abraham answers, **“There, in the tent.”**

Then – to Abraham, mind you – one of these guests renews the startling promise that came from God long ago. He says, **“I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”**

A ways behind Abraham was the tent. Within the tent was Sarah, listening. And within Sarah was doubt.

Doubt that God could – or would – do such a thing.

In the previous chapter, Abraham laughed at the idea of he and Sarah as the beginning of a nation of people.

Now the idea has come to Sarah’s ears, and she shares her husband’s response – perhaps not unlike the way the original temptation passed from one spouse to the other back in Genesis 3.

She laughs – not a goodhearted chuckle, but a dismissive scoffing kind of laugh with the thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I *now* have this pleasure?”

By now any thought that these visitors were ordinary folk has been done away with.

One of them identified as Yahweh then replies –  
to Abraham, mind you – **“Why did Sarah laugh and say,  
‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’”**

The conversation is among the men, but it is about Sarah’s body, it is Sarah who responds, and her response is the focal point of Yahweh’s message: **“Is anything too hard for Yahweh?  
I will return to you at the appointed time next year,  
and Sarah will have a son.”**

Now she’s still listening in, and now she’s heard her name on God’s lips... kinda in a good way, but also kinda not in a good way.  
She gets scared.

Wouldn’t you?

Then she pulls one of the classic kid moves: Deny the obvious.  
She lies in the Visitor’s face and says, “I didn’t laugh.”

“Yes, you did laugh,” Yahweh replies.

Throughout the service, we’ve had some video clips compiled by our youth.  
If your friends heard that you were watching people imitate how animals eat and laughed at it,  
you’d probably feel kind of embarrassed.

You might even lie to them. “I didn’t laugh.”

But I'm here as a witness. I saw you. Yes, you did laugh.

You might not have understood it,  
you might not have thought it was appropriate at church,  
you might have even scoffed.

But you laughed – same as Sarah.

We laugh because things don't go the way we expect them to.

A good joke switches out a presumed sequence for a clever alternative.  
Laughter means our comfort zone has been invaded,  
the normal operation of things has been overcome,  
and we've been confronted with an unexpected outcome.

God had promised a child to Sarah before, but it still wasn't what she expected.

Because her problem was too big for God.  
Her situation, her barrenness, was a thing that she accepted long ago  
as a fact of life, and a far flung promise from God  
wasn't going to overturn that.

So God say to Abraham, "In a year's time Sarah, your wife will have a son."

That's a joke to her. That is laughable.

God says to you, "In a year's time, the truth of who I am will wash all over you  
and be put on display for everyone to see."

And we laugh. My problems are too big for you, God.

What would you know about my situation?

That's when God looks past the other people in this room,  
and peers all the way back to the tent flap we're peeking out of and says,  
"Why are you laughing? Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

If our answer is, "Yes. Some things are too hard for the Lord,"

then we have not yet come to an encounter with the Living God.

That answer is a sign that the God you worship is an imposter.

But if we say, “No, nothing is too hard for you, Lord,”  
then we have placed ourselves and our entire world in God’s hands,  
and we invite the possibility of the impossible  
to take place in our own lives.

Sarah seeks a way out of these binary options:

“Wha...are you talking to *me*, Lord? I...I didn’t laugh.”

Yes. You did laugh.

Faith in God is not a straightforward, obvious, or simple thing to undertake.  
Anyone who tells you faith comes easy either hasn’t lived long enough,  
is self-deluded, or wants your money.

Walter Brueggemann says, **“Once again, this story shows what a scandal  
and difficulty faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act  
which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception.  
The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece  
of wisdom that is easily accommodated  
to everything else.  
Embrace of this radical gospel requires shattering and discontinuity.”**

Children, youth, New Members, teachers, friends and visitors, the reality is this:

Our problems are big, and our doubt is understandable,  
but the Lord is the maker of all things; the author of reality.

The gospel of Jesus Christ doesn’t care about  
our limiting expectations.

Our doubt or disbelief does not disqualify God’s ability to act in our lives.

Laugh or not, God’s promise is God’s promise.

We can get on board with it, or not,  
but there’s more happening in our lives and in our world  
than we can expect, predict, or be prepared for.

The good news is not that if we believe God,  
then the big problems in our lives will go away  
and we will find ourselves in a life of comfort and ease.  
That is *certainly* not what happened to Abraham and Sarah.

Rather, the good news is that however enduring and complicated our problems are,  
God and God's plan of redemption, renewal, hope,  
and restoration of all things through Jesus Christ is more than enough  
to get us through today and provide hope for the day  
when all things will be made new.

If that makes you laugh, so be it.

Don't deny it – God knows your heart.

But know this: God's good plan for you and the whole of creation carries on,  
for nothing is too hard for the Lord.