

*Gracious Surprises*  
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7  
June 25, 2023  
Pastor Sarah Wiles

**18** *The Lord appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the day's heat. <sup>2</sup> He looked up and suddenly saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from his tent entrance to greet them and bowed deeply. <sup>3</sup> He said, "Sirs, if you would be so kind, don't just pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought so you may wash your feet and refresh yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me offer you a little bread so you will feel stronger, and after that you may leave your servant and go on your way—since you have visited your servant."*

*They responded, "Fine. Do just as you have said."*

<sup>6</sup> *So Abraham hurried to Sarah at his tent and said, "Hurry! Knead three seahs of the finest flour and make some baked goods!" <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the cattle, took a healthy young calf, and gave it to a young servant, who prepared it quickly. <sup>8</sup> Then Abraham took butter, milk, and the calf that had been prepared, put the food in front of them, and stood under the tree near them as they ate.*

<sup>9</sup> *They said to him, "Where's your wife Sarah?"*

*And he said, "Right here in the tent."*

<sup>10</sup> *Then one of the men said, "I will definitely return to you about this time next year. Then your wife Sarah will have a son!"*

*Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were both very old. Sarah was no longer menstruating. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, I'm no longer able to have children and my husband's old.*

<sup>13</sup> *The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Me give birth? At my age?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too difficult for the Lord? When I return to you about this time next year, Sarah will have a son."*

<sup>15</sup> *Sarah lied and said, "I didn't laugh," because she was frightened.*

*But he said, "No, you laughed."*

...

**21** *The Lord was attentive to Sarah just as he had said, and the Lord carried out just what he had promised her. <sup>2</sup> She became pregnant and gave birth to a son for Abraham when he was old, at the very time God had told him. <sup>3</sup> Abraham named his son—the one Sarah bore him—Isaac. <sup>4</sup> Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old just as God had commanded him. <sup>5</sup> Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born. <sup>6</sup> Sarah said, "God has given me laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me." <sup>7</sup> She said, "Who could have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse sons? But now I've given birth to a son when he was old!"*

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Sarah and Abraham are at home minding their own business when the story starts today. It's been years since God spoke to Abraham and promised them a child, and a hope, and a future.

The promise never came true. God promised them descendants as numerous as the stars. Leaning on that promise Sarah and Abraham planned to have a bunch of babies, and grandbabies and great-grandbabies. They were going to have a whole passel of progeny. But years and years passed, and they never had children. Their plans didn't work out.

Maybe you know exactly how that feels because you've longed for a child, and it hasn't come to pass. My husband and I struggled with infertility. We ultimately had children through the marvels of in-vitro fertilization, but I vividly remember how much I hated this story of Sarah and Abraham when we were in the hardest days. Nobody promised me a baby. I share that because I want you to know there's space for you if you're going through something similar. Sarah may end this story with a baby, but that's not always the case. If this story brings you pain, you're allowed to skip it.

Sometimes people suggest that *because* Abraham and Sarah welcomed these guests God finally gave them a child. It was a test, and they passed it, so they got what they wanted.

But that's not what the story says. There's no talk of earning or deserving. It's a grace-drenched promise. All Sarah and Abraham do is open their hearts and lives to unexpected guests.

And then... and then these strange visitors make an even stranger promise. Next year Sarah will have a baby.

Ha! Yeah, right. We've been down this road before. The promise of a child. The hope that you can't quite kill. The crushing month by month disappointment.

But now she's old, much too old for children. And this stranger wants to go making ludicrous claims. Ha! Of course, she laughed. We skipped the story, but Abraham laughed, too. In the chapter just before this God came to Abraham and made the same promise and the story says he laughed so hard he fell on his face.

Fair enough. The idea's ridiculous. They're too old and this is the real world. They stopped hoping a long time ago.

I wonder if any of us know how that feels, to have longed for something and over many years to battle with the hope and the disappointment until finally you move into a space beyond all of that.

My father was a defense attorney. He mostly worked with people who were guilty of something. One time he described his work to me as not so much about winning, helping people to lose on their own terms. All of us do some measure of that. Life wears on us. We come to terms with disappointment and heartache. We realize that no one wins all the time. So, we begin to learn the art of losing on our own terms.

We do that with varying degrees of graciousness. Sometimes we are able to soften into the reality that is, rather than the reality we'd hoped for. But sometimes we become cynical, too brittle for the vulnerability hope requires. Of course, Sarah laughed.

But the stranger looks at them curiously. Why do you laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord? And then they leave, leaving the question hanging. Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

We all know what we're supposed to say: No. Nothing's too hard for God.

But in real life, it's not that easy. When we're longing for healing, or a new way forward, or a new future, when we're longing for a reason to hope, it's not such an easy question.

Is anything too difficult for God? Or, put differently, is this all there is? Does everything happen according to our expectations? Does  $2 + 2$  always equal 4, and does everything that goes up always come down? Are we destined to repeat the mistakes of the past? Is reality a closed set?

Or is there the possibility of something more? Something *new*? Something that none of the facts at hand would have predicted, that's totally unexpected? Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

It's an open question. I think it's a genuine question for any of us who wrestle with this thing we call a life of faith. Is anything too difficult for the Lord? I don't know. I do know we don't always get what we long for—be that a child or physical healing or a repaired relationship. And yet, I can't give up the hope that surprising things can and do happen.

I wonder what Sarah and Abraham thought as they cleaned up. As they swept up the crumbs and put away the leftovers, did they mull over the visit, the three strangers, the strange prediction, and the even stranger question, is anything too difficult? Maybe Sarah laughed a little more as she got ready for bed. Ha. A child at this age. Sure.

And then, the story says, it was with Sarah as God had said, as God had promised. She bore a son, and named him Isaac which means laughter, because he made her laugh. Who would have ever guessed, who could even believe, that this would happen? Her laughter of "yeah, right" has changed to something along the lines of, "Well, I'll be." Her laughter of cynicism has become the laughter of joyful surprise.

One of my favorite songs is the old gospel song "Over My Head." Over my head, it goes, I hear music in the air. Over my head, I hear music in the air. Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere. That's what this story reminds me of, except it's Sarah's laughter I hear: the laughter of I thought it was one way, but it's the other. I was sure there was no hope and look at me now. Laughter at the incredible, unbelievable, absurdly gracious way of God.

This story doesn't pin everything down for us. It doesn't promise us that things will all work out. It doesn't say do A and B and C and then God will give you your heart's desire. It's not that simple. Life's not that simple, thank goodness.

No, what this story offers us is the echo of Sarah's laughter. And in that laughter, it gives us Sarah's testimony—I'd given up hope, but now the whole world will laugh with me in joy.

As you go about your week, may you hear Sarah's laughter, over your head. May it delight and disturb you, surprise and unsettle you. May you hear in that laughter an echo of the promise, a chorus of grace.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023