

"The Last Laugh"

Genesis 18:1-15

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I want to tell you the truth today. But this is not just any truth, facts or figures etc. This truth will transform your life. This is God's truth, larger, wider and richer than mere objective facts or figures.

This truth is packaged differently than over-the-counter kinds of truth you hear or read these days. This truth, like much of God's truth, comes in a story. The story is short, direct and without practical application. There's no formula for life here, no quick steps to success, no method for improving your faith, no Dr. Phil to fix what's wrong with us.

In fact our story is a story in a story. It's part of the larger story of Abraham and Sarah which dominates the book of Genesis. Their story is the foundational story for Israel and the Church. It's a story that includes us and is not yet complete.

The story is more about God and God's ways with the world than a story about Sarah and Abraham. This story declares that God is committed to the creation and is determined to do good to the world. In fact, God is so committed to the world God made a binding covenant to bless the world. And the way God blesses the world is through people, God's own people – that's us.

Now Abraham believed God's promise. But, like most of us, Abraham and Sarah had a tough time trusting God with their lives and the details of their future. Their faith was big on the facts of the case – God would bless them and make them a great nation – but they kept insisting they would work out the details. That led to a series of adventures and misadventures. And, while they kept taking matters into their own hands, God kept repeating the covenant promise. Like us, they needed reminding.

Years passed and with the years, a problem: no son. You need a son to start a nation. So Sarah took matters into her own hands. She offered her servant girl to Abraham. Maybe she could bear a son in her name. (That was a custom in those days.) It worked and the servant girl bore a son named Ishmael. But, as Abraham and Sarah discovered later, he wasn't the beginning of the new nation.

The years continued to pass and no son. So much time passed they were too old to have a son. Along the way Abraham and Sarah got used to infertility and their faith in God and hope for the future faded. Like us they became resigned to the possibilities and impossibilities of their lives – to their fate. The future was closed. Their world was growing smaller along with their fading hope.

So, one more time, God reminded Abraham of the promise (Genesis 17). "Yes, Abraham, you will be the father of a people," God said. "I will keep my promise. You have a destiny far beyond the possibilities that hem in your life. And, by the way, Sarah will bear your son."

Well, that knocked Abraham off his feet. He fell down trying to hold in his laughter at the absurd promise. To himself he said, "What a joke. I'm nearly 100 years old; Sarah is 90. Can't happen."

To God Abraham said, "Please bless my son Ishmael." God replied, "I'll be back next year to visit your new son."

Then the narrative turns to our story in Genesis 18. Abraham was sitting under a great oak tree out of the shimmering heat of the midday sun. Work on his farm and the surrounding farms stood still.

I can almost see it can you? I can see my grandfather, a farmer, at rest beneath the great trees in the front yard. His day began at 4:30am when he and his brother went to the barn and the chores began. Then they worked in the fields under the hot western sun until noon. He and Uncle Ray would come up the path from the barn. Grandpa would sit down at the table on the screened in porch. Uncle Ray made his way across the lane to his house. They'd eat "dinner," their main meal of the day. Then Grandpa went outside and sat under the trees to rest while Grandma cleaned up. Sometimes he'd sharpen the shovel he used to help irrigate his fields. Or, he'd take out his pocket knife and trim the callous on his thumb made by that shovel. Often, he'd nod off to sleep.

Abraham sat and rested in the shade in front of the tent. Inside, Sarah was cleaning up. Suddenly, three strangers appeared out of the shimmering heat. They stopped and stood in front of Abraham.

Fully alert now, Abraham sprang into action. Hospitality required it. A guest must be treated like a king or queen. That was an honored part of the culture.

"Please, my lords, sit down and rest. I will wash your feet, bring you a drink and prepare your dinner." Abraham rushed into the tent to tell Sarah there'd be guests for dinner. "Fix bread. Quick now," he said. He rushed from the tent, summoned a servant and went to the pasture where he picked out a plump calf. "Slaughter the calf and bring the meat to the tent," he commanded his servant.

The entire household swung into action. They had company. A feast would follow. And it did. Abraham, always the good host, stood under that great tree and watched his guests eat their fill.

When the meal was finished the guests pushed back from the table. One of them called out. "Where's Sarah?" Abraham struggled to cover his shock. "How'd they know her name?" Besides, it was most inappropriate to inquire after the womenfolk in Abraham's world.

All Abraham could say was the truth. "She's in the tent."

"Well," said the unknown guest, "I'll be back next year and in the meantime Sarah will bear a son."

Sarah was listening in on the conversation from just inside the tent. Now it was her turn. She struggled to stifle her laughter. A little snicker made it past her closed lips. What a preposterous thought. Hadn't they seen her – an old lady?

At this point the narrator leans into the story and adds, just in case we've not caught on yet, "Now Sarah was really old, way too old to have a child."

Perhaps Sarah's laughter was the bitter laugh of long disappointment. Now resistant to hope all she could do was laugh.

"Abraham," the stranger said, "Why did Sarah laugh?" Now comes the point of the story in the question of the ages, "Is anything too wonderful/difficult for the Lord?"

Sarah interrupted the theology lesson and denied she'd laughed. "Oh yes you did," the stranger said.

And that's the end of the story. Immediately the subject changes and we're left with Abraham and Sarah to contemplate the great question the stranger posed. "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?"

I hope you noticed the story left it an open question. Neither Abraham, Sarah nor the narrator answer the question. We're left in ambiguity. On the one hand a powerful theological statement: nothing is impossible for God. On the other hand we're always limited by human possibilities. To be human means impossibilities and hopeless prospects. To believe in God means nothing is really impossible.

It reminds one of Jesus' statement to his disciples. "With God all things are possible."

Will Sarah and Abraham believe in the conventional wisdom accumulated over their long lifetimes? Or will they hope in God and the promise of God that is beyond human possibility?

That's the question on which all our lives and faith turn, isn't it? We all live by the conventional wisdoms we've learned. This accumulated human wisdom makes things as we know it work. They "fit" the world as we know it. Then we hear the word of God which comes to shatter our human wisdom so faith can spring forth once again.

This story was first heard by ancient Israel. They were a small nation surrounded by larger, powerful nations. Yet they had this promise from God that they were the people through whom God blessed all nations of the earth. How can this be when their survival seemed so tenuous?

I suspect when Israel heard this story they didn't focus on the age and fertility issue. They thought about their impotence in the face of very human realities that threatened their very existence. And they heard that shattering word: "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?"

That's our question too. Look at the world and hear again the promise of God. We, the people of God, are uniquely blessed in order to bring God's shalom to the world. Yet, it seems like the world is less and less blessed, less shalom-like every year. How can it be that we can bring justice, righteousness and peace to a world like this? Can the church be the church and really make a difference? Can mere words, our good news, prevail against massive, systemic and growing evil?

Is anything too difficult for the Lord? Will we live in the hope promised by God's word? Or not?

Colonial Church is facing large issues. Some of you are wondering if we have a future and what kind of future it will be. You know the realities, the potential stumbling blocks and you stifle your laughter.

Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

Some of you have lived long enough – you've become accustomed to the way things are. There's not much hope left. Some of you haven't lived long at all and you know full well the real story of your own life. You wonder if God can really make a difference, transform your life. You know yourself and, when you hear the word of God say the point of this journey is to become like Christ, you cover your mouth to hold back the snicker.

Is anything too difficult for the Lord? That is the shattering word of God for life and for faith. Is anything too difficult for the Lord? Of course not. Believe it – or not.