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YEAR A: SEASON AFTER PENTECOST

(Sunday between June 12 and June 18)

Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7)

This is the second of five lectionary readings from the story of Abraham and Sarah. This one is set by the oaks of Mamre at Hebron (Gen 18:1) and seems to follow directly on from Genesis 13 which ended with the same setting. Apart from the reference to Hebron in Gen 14:13, the intervening chapters have other settings. However, in the present form of the book we come to chapter 18 having heard in those intervening narratives a record of the divine promises to Abraham and Sarah, especially that of a son (see Gen 13:16; 15:4-6; 17:16). We are prepared to hear more of this promise, which, as the optional portion of the lectionary (Gen 21:1-7) shows, reaches its fulfillment in chapter 21 with the birth of Isaac.

This story is a family narrative and the reader quickly enters into the world of family life. In today's reading the action initially takes place at the perimeter of family life, where strangers are encountered (vv. 1-8). It then shifts quickly to inner family life and the intimate connections between family members (vv. 9-15). It might seem as though the grand purpose of universal blessing etc. in 12:2-3 has been left behind, but the God who makes promises to this family is the same one who has established a covenant (Genesis 15 and 17) and made promises regarding Abraham's descendants (e.g. 15:13-16). The emphasis on the wonderful working of Yahweh with regard to this family (v. 14) will have import for all who claim descent from Abraham.

Jewish tradition makes much of this story in terms of the response of Abraham to his guests in vv. 3-4. Abraham's action reflects the expected hospitality a semi-nomadic type of family would provide for travelers. Christian tradition has also made much of the story. This is especially so in relation to the famous icon by the Russian artist Andrei Rublev. It depicts the three angels who visited Abraham in relation to the Trinity, although such an interpretation does not come from the story's Old Testament context.

The first part of the reading sees the initiative taken by Yahweh (v. 1). He speaks to Abraham much as he did in chapter 12. On this occasion, however, the story starts with the appearance of three men (v. 2). They are not described as 'angels', that is as divine messengers, but as men standing before Abraham. It is soon clear that they indeed are the former. Their roles soon emerge as that of divine messengers. The transitions from 'Yahweh' (v. 1) to 'men/they' (vv. 2 and 9) and back again (v. 13) equate the men and Yahweh. They appear to be even something

more than messengers, especially the one who speaks on their behalf in vv. 9-15 and later negotiates the future of Sodom with Abraham (vv. 22-33).

The promise made to Abraham in this passage could not be briefer and is completely unconditional: 'Your wife Sarah shall have a son' (v. 10). Of course, the promise is reiterating what has already been said, but there is a difference here. Unlike chapter 12, no relinquishment of the past life is asked of Abraham, only trust in the future provision of Yahweh (cf. Gen 15:6). The identity and character of God, established in the opening chapters of Genesis, focused on God as creator and determiner of national fortunes. That may be taken for granted here. By way of contrast, towards the end of this encounter the conversation over Sarah's skeptical reaction to the promise of a son offers us a very engaging picture of Yahweh in the person of the man. He asks Abraham why Sarah laughed, but does not wait for an answer. He goes straight on to affirm that nothing is too wonderful for Yahweh and repeats the earlier promise, adding 'in due season'. In the KJV in place of 'wonderful' we read 'hard': 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' The root word is most frequent in the Psalms and refers to marvelous acts of God. Abraham and Sarah are to believe that despite their old age, God will make something wonderful happen, and the timing of the birth will be right for them.

There are many 'mysterious' aspects to this story, all of which underscore in one way or another the wonder of the promised act of Yahweh. First, these visitors to Abraham and Sarah appear from nowhere. We as readers know who they are, but Abraham does not. As he sits in a semi-arid place the sudden appearance of three men creates mystery. For the remainder of the first part of the passage the attention moves to Abraham in his flurry to be a good host, but after the guests have eaten the meal provided their mysterious presence is reasserted. They know Sarah's name, they reiterate the promise to Abraham, and they know that Sarah has laughed even though she is hidden within the tent (v.12). It is precisely with this last mysterious insight that the name of Yahweh ('LORD') is used again for the stranger. These may be small things in one way, especially for us who sit as readers of a familiar story, but they do underline the import of the question Yahweh addresses to the couple in v. 14. The minor mysteries of the story underline the wonder that the fulfillment of the promise itself will be.

When Sarah overhears the conversation between Abraham and the men (v.10) she has a great chuckle, knowing the physical state of her body, which is now well beyond child bearing. She finally enters the conversation just as it closes. Her rhetorical question ('After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?') questions the divine promise itself. The pleasure she refers to is that of bearing a child as Yahweh's paraphrase of her question in v. 13 shows. Her rather feisty assertion at the end of the passage ('I did not laugh') provides the reader with an assertive picture of Sarah, not inconsistent with her treatment of Hagar which we have seen already in Genesis 16 and will see again in chapter 21.

The use of the word 'laugh' several times in these verses has more meaning than appears from reading up to that point. The root word meaning to laugh is *tsakaq*. It is the root from which Isaac's name is taken. The naming of the baby in Gen 21:3-5 underlines this while also bringing out the irony of the name and the parents' response to the promise of a son in old age. In chapter 21 Sarah's laughter, a matter of incredulity in Gen 18:12 echoing Abraham's own laughter in Gen 17:17, is turned to the laughter of joy. Isaac's name is one full of meaning. In fact, it carries the message of the passage itself: human disbelief and doubt is turned to joy and fulfillment when addressed by God. The final exchange in today's passage is intriguing. When Sarah indignantly denies her laughter at the promise the man/Yahweh has the last word: 'Oh yes, you did laugh'. Abraham and Sarah are dealing with a God who enjoys the dynamic and humour of the conversation and has his own fun in fulfilling his promise to his people with this 'unexpected' birth. If good humour has a way of disarming its hearer in order that a serious truth may be revealed, then God is the humorist *par excellence*, appreciating and participating in the humour of the very situation in which he is working out his future for his people. Yahweh's opening divine manifesto (Gen 12:1-3) will be fulfilled not only through the one Abraham who gets going, but also through the one Isaac, in whose birth the divine irony, the godly unexpected, the reversal of circumstances, is set at the very forefront of Israel's story.

[Psalm 116](#)

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