

18 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little 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 hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures[c] of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." 7 Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 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 your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?" 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 wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "Yes, you did laugh."

21 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. 2 Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. 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 Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." 7 And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

### **-Updated New Revised Standard Version**

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"Who's bouquet is THAT?"

I don't know where she came from. Bridezilla exploded from me with little warning when the florist opened the box to display the work that had been done on my behalf.

"Why, it's yours!"

"No, it is NOT."

The bouquet looked nothing like the picture I had toted from florist to florist until I found one who said she could do it. I was incredulous when she had said she could do it as so many florists were sure they could not, but she assured me in as many ways as she could think to and so I fully expected a bouquet resembling the picture I had presented. What I was looking at when bridezilla emerged was something completely different. My bridesmaids initially recoiled in fear, but then each stepped up to help smooth the moment. My sister, my maid of honor, gave a most memorable response when we got to the car. "Remember how you said you were going to have to work at letting go of your expectations in order to just enjoy the day? Well, now is your chance to practice." I wouldn't say that her response was exactly smoothing in the moment, but... it was wise.

Expectations... we've all got them, don't we? And they can cause such trouble, can't they? Whenever I've managed to go into an experience with few expectations it is always far more delightful. I pity those who drove home with me after my third year at any summer camp. I was always a moaning mess on such drives because year three never lived up to the expectations instilled by year one. But what in our lives ever transpires according to expectation? If my life can serve as an example then I would say, "very little". Here are some things I have expected in my not-so-long life. I expected I would major in music- didn't happen. I expected I would NOT be a minister- we all know how that turned out. I expected that Kevin would be only a very good friend for the rest of my life- that he would be my husband? Completely unexpected. Once I gave in and accepted that I would be a minister after all, I thought God would surely call me to an urban parish- well... that first call in a county with more cows than people, that was a surprise. And once settled into that lovely, north country village, I expected that we would welcome a child to be loved and embraced by all the people we had come to love so well- only to get pregnant two months after learning I'd be moving on. I expected when we moved to Indiana the day before kindergarten started that we'd be there until Caroline graduated from high school— and yet as Caroline wrapped up second grade we, delightfully, made our way to the glorious Pacific Northwest. And how about this week? I expected we'd be launching Supper Church this weekend and I'd be healthy. Ha.

*Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.*

And how about all of you? Can you trace similar expectations in your personal lives that went unmet? How about in your church life? If we've had any background with the church, this church or any church, we can accumulate expectations— that pastors will or will not do certain things, that certain church members will behave in certain ways, that meetings will proceed in certain ways, that committees will operate thus, that the pews will be full, that the music will sound just so. Haven't virtually all of our expectations been shaken up these past three years?

How about Sarah and Abraham? What sort of expectations do you think they had? It is probably a given that as a young couple in the ancient world, not so different from many young couples in the modern world, they expected to birth children. And the fact that Abraham seemed to have an unusual connection with God, that being that God had a tendency to talk to Abraham on a regular basis, and more than that, that God had a tendency to make and repeat promises to Abraham, well, this fact would have rather enhanced the expectations. Especially given the fact that God was prone to promising two things, over and over again, land and children. God even waxed poetic about the children thing, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you can count them," God said, "So will your descendants be." So as Abraham and Sarah wandered with their tribe, settling here and there, pitching tents, and as year after year went by without a child, any child, the expectations must have weighed heavy on their hearts. Sarah did the only thing she knew she could do and offered her slave to her husband so that she might bear a child on their behalf. But this did not meet expectations, not Abraham and Sarah's expectations, not God's expectations. The bitterness that grew between Sarah and Hagar, her slave, the coldness she felt towards that child, all are painful elements of the story of Abraham and Sarah. The stars in their eyes surely dimmed as the years went by- as the only descendent and his mother were cast into the wilderness, as Sarah passed the point at which women have children. I wonder at the effect that expectations had on Sarah and Abraham's ability to experience joy.

And then three visitors show up to their settlement. We're told that God is somehow present in these three visitors, but there is no indication that Abraham knows

this. He does what is customary in his culture, jumping to offer hospitality to these people passing through. He promises something modest and delivers something grand. To this point in the story nothing is unexpected. Sarah may have been a bit put out by the demands placed on her, but I suspect that this wasn't the first time in her many years of marriage that she was called upon to do something seemingly grand with little notice. But when the visitors speak, all the expectations which had hardened with decades of waiting crumble under the weight of the unexpected news. Sarah laughed. Of course she laughed. Can you blame her? It wasn't a light giggle. It wasn't a chortle. It was a snort. I'm sure of it. It was a "Give me a break" sort of laugh. "NOW, LORD? NOW?" I don't really think it was a disbelieving laugh. It was a laugh that erupted from all those years of unmet expectations.

But this is how God is, isn't it? God always seems to do the unexpected. God doesn't deal in human expectations. Why we keep coming to God with our expectations and assuming God will deliver is beyond me, but we all do it, don't we? If there is anything predictable about God, it is that God is unpredictable. But... here's another thing I see in Sarah's laugh. I see the first hint of joy busting into what had been a joyless landscape. And often when things transpire in completely unexpected ways, when we can let our expectations crumble and let the unexpected in, joy does break in for us too, doesn't it? Don't we know that to be true even in our church life? Isn't it often the unexpected that stirs the greatest joy in us? The Bachtet, outdoor worship, chapel worship, a zoom connection to Cuban kindred, the appearance of people we have missed, a testimonial from a newer member that touches our hearts, transformation of lives unfolding before our eyes? And when we struggle the most isn't it often because we can't let go of expectations and disappointment burdens us and strains our relationships? Isn't it because sometimes we expect the worst from each other and find ourselves living into self-fulfilling prophecies?

Expectations. Sigh. It is good to be honest about our hopes or expectations, but it is also wise, very wise, to hold them lightly. Or, in the words of my sister, to "practice" letting them go. Because, just ask Sarah and Abraham, God doesn't deal in human

expectations. Whatever God will do in the next months and years of this church's life and ministry, we can be sure it will be... unexpected.

But if that's all that we could say about God it would seem we worship a rather capricious and unreliable God. But even the story of Abraham and Sarah tells us that there is more that we can say about God. The God we worship makes and keeps promises in unexpected ways and times. The God we worship and serve is a God for us, invested in our lives, invested in this world, so invested that God came to be with us in Jesus Christ and did the most unexpected thing imaginable going to the lengths of dying on a cross and walking out of a grave three days later.

So we can laugh today, even if our laughter is not much more than a snort, we can laugh. And we can let our laughter lighten our expectations and open us to the unexpected, powerful blessings that God has in store for us.