

Foundations: Abraham II—THE SURPRISE
Genesis 18:9-13, 21:1-7 (AFBC 7/23/17)

Last week, we began a three-Sunday look at the patriarch Abraham. Over the next several weeks, we'll learn some lessons from Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph as well—but today, we continue our study of Abraham and his wife, Sarah.

In last week's text, Genesis 12, we reflected on God's call of Abraham and what God asked Him to do. As part of this encounter, God promised to make of Abraham "a great nation." Think children, descendants, heirs!

Now, in reading from chapters 18 and 21 today, we're skipping over a lot—including passages that tell us how Abraham and Sarah tried to take God's promise of "nation-building" into their own hands (Hagar and Ishmael). If you know this couple's story, you're aware that this effort had caused some problems for them.

We saw last week that God would 'set the rules and call the shots' in this relationship. Still, they thought they could sort of help God along. This ended, however, when God chose to do something that was beyond anything they could have imagined or, given their stage in life, anything they could ever have accomplished on their own!

We'll pick up the story at Genesis 18, verse nine. Three guests have stopped by to see Abraham and Sarah. Before long, they realize that these three are messengers from God:

Genesis 18:9-13

⁹ "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. ¹⁰ Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'"

Let's talk for a moment about... surprises. They can be either good or bad, I suppose; although I tend to put surprises in the good category—like an unexpected encounter with an old friend, or a party thrown in your honor that you really didn't see coming!

If it's something bad, most of us wouldn't call it as a surprise. If it's bad, we would more likely refer to it as a "shock" or a "disappointment."

A surprise, on the other hand, is when the folks from Publishers Clearing House show up on your doorstep. Of course, when, after speaking with you, they determine they're at the wrong address, well now... that's a terrible disappointment.

Our text for this morning talks about a big surprise that came into the life of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. It was a bit shocking, really—but not... disappointing. Not at all.

It was certainly a big old surprise, though, when Sarah learned that she was to have a baby! Pregnancies tend to fall into one of two categories: planned and unplanned. Which means that when a couple learns they are expecting a child, it may come as a welcomed "surprise" or a disturbing "shock."

Some of us here have experienced the full gamut of these reactions. At times, we haven't been able to fully grasp just how wonderful these surprises are until the shock of it all has worn off. Some of you are relating to this, aren't you?

But I know of no one who could relate to this more than the Old Testament character we know as Sarah—the old... Old Testament character—the extremely shocked, stunned, and wonderfully surprised wife of Abraham--Sarah. Let's look at some more of her story now as we find it in **Genesis 21:1-7**:

¹ Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

⁶ Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." ⁷ And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (Genesis 21:1-7)

Have you ever shared this kind of laughter with friends—the wonderful laughter that comes from one of God’s little surprises? I’m sure many of us have—and what a joy to do so!

Baptist preacher, teacher, and poet, Calvin Miller, captured this big event for Abraham and Sarah in a delightful poem called ***The Peek-a-Boo Surprise***. If it sounds vaguely familiar, I shared this poem with you twelve years ago on Mother’s Day, 2005. Forgive me for being so repetitious!

The Peek-a-Boo Surprise
by Calvin Miller

*One night old Sarah
Looked out at the trees
And swallowed the last of her
Fig cakes and cheese,
And broke into tears,
Wailing six "dreary-meeees!"
"I'm so very unhappy!
Abraham, please
Would you pray and ask God
If maybe just maybe
He'd answer our prayers
And give us a baby?"
"Now, Honey," said Abraham,
"Don't make a fuss.
In April you're gonna be
Seventy plus.
You're getting so old
That you barely can hold
Your plate or your bowl
Or your saucer or cup.
It takes you an hour
Sometimes to stand up.
Forget about babies;
I'll buy you a pup.
Anyway, why
Do you want a new baby?"*

"Maybe, just maybe,
 I'd like to sing softly,
 'Sweet rock-a-bye baby.
 Momma loves snookums,
 Kitch, kitch kitchie koo!
 Patty-cake, patty-cake,
 Peek, peekaboo!'
 And I want a sweet
 Little baby to coo,
 'Boo gurgedy boo,
 Be bah nah gurgle
 Goo gurgle goo goo!"
 Then God sent an angel
 With bright shiny hair
 Who came down and cried,
 "Hey Abe, are you there?
 I must tell you true;
 God's going to create
 A great nation from you."
 Abe scratched his head
 And looked rather blue.
 "You'd best hurry up;
 My life's nearly through.
 I'm old as the hills
 And my Sarah is, too."

"Oh, yeah?" said the angel.
 "Now, listen to me.
 Your grandkids will be
 Like the sands of the sea —
 Far, far too many
 To bounce on your knee!"
 "Yeah," argued Abie,
 "Just how can that be?
 I'll sure have to bounce them
 On bony old knees.
 Besides, my sweet Sarah
 Is all wrinkled up.
 She sleeps every night
 With her teeth in a cup.
 I tell you the woman
 Is babyproof now.
 She's old — I say, old.
 Her joints have grown cold.

*And if she had a baby,
 Then what would I do —
 Play Little League ball
 At a hundred and two?"*
*The angel just smiled.
 He started to leave
 And then turned to speak:
 "Tell Sarah to check
 With her doctor next week."
 When the angel had gone,
 Sarah saw her physician,
 A Mesopotamian
 Old obstetrician,
 And said to him, "Doctor,
 I've been feeling dizzy."
 The doctor turned white
 And then fainted away
 And when he revived
 He said, "My, what a day!*

*Sarah, believe me, you're not going to die,
 But you'll have a baby
 The eighth of July."
 Old Sarah stood gasping
 With nothing to say!
 She, too, clapped her forehead
 And fainted away.
 And when she got up
 She ended her stress
 And bought a Chaldean
 Maternity dress.*

*And months hurried by,
 And at last came July,
 And Sarah and Abie
 Sang, "Rock-a-bye, baby.
 Momma loves snookums,
 Kitch, kitch ... kitchie koo!
 Patty-cake, patty-cake
 Peek, peekaboo!
 And sure enough, Isaac
 Said "Gurgledy boo,
 Be bah nah gurgle
 Goo gurgle goo goo."*

God's wonderful surprises! They leave us laughing and celebrating God's goodness and love. This is how it was for Abraham and Sarah. This is also how it is for all of us who know their story and believe—not only because of what happened to them, but because of the surprises God brings into our lives as well.

I think the experience of Abraham and Sarah suggests at least three occasions when you and I are surprised by God—three marvelous surprises that can fill our lives with joy and laughter.

I. First, consider **GOD'S PRESENCE**--those surprising moments when God breaks through the ordinary times of our lives and transforms them into something quite extraordinary.

These are the times when God surprises us with an overwhelming awareness of his presence, and we know we have been with the Lord. (Like in the delivery room when...But there are other times when we're overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence).

It may happen in a moment of private devotion or in a service of public worship. We may be driving down the road and round a corner or top a hill and there be greeted by some beautiful landscape, and feel surrounded in that moment by the awesome creative power of God. We laugh in our hearts and say "Wow—God is so good!"

Earlier in Genesis, we're told: "The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day." Old Abraham got to his feet as quick as he was able and called Sarah, "Sarah, guess who's coming to dinner."

He told his servants to prepare a feast. The Lord was present. A celebration was in order. Let the laughter begin! How wonderful it is to be surprised by God's Presence!

II. Or how about **GOD'S PROMISES**? "A baby? At our age?" It's no wonder they laughed. This promise seemed too incredible to possibly be true. But it's like the great philosopher Yogi Berra said, "It ain't over 'til it's over."

If anything has ever proven the validity of that statement, surely it was Abraham and Sarah's big news. "It ain't over 'til it's over," and what's more, "God says when it's over!"

It seems that Abraham and Sarah were much better at counting years than at calculating the power of God. So they laughed—first because it seemed so unbelievable, and later because they began to realize that God wasn't kidding.

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?" God asks them. Then He adds, "I'll return at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." "I promise!"

When was the last time you allowed yourself to be surprised by the promises of God? We sing "Standing on the Promises" while we sit on the promises and listen to so many songs and sermons about God's promises that they become like water off a duck's back. They don't surprise us. They don't make us laugh for joy.

Don't let it happen. Our relationship with God was never meant to be mundane—lifeless—or laughless. The wonder of God's promises should fill our lives with joyful surprises.

When life has you discouraged, let this promise surprise you: "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage and He shall strengthen your heart: (Psalm 27:14) Or this promise:" "My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in your weakness." (I Corinthians 12:9)

When your life is plagued by guilt, experience the liberating joy of this promise: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:9)

When there is fear and confusion in our life, hear this promise: "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

When confronted by the last great enemy death, know the victory of Jesus' promise, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

Know these promises of God. Meditate upon them. Commit them to memory. But don't allow yourself to become so familiar with them that they cease to surprise you and cause you to rejoice and be glad over the goodness and mercy of the Lord.

III. And do not forget the greatest surprise of all: **GOD'S PERFORMANCE.** His presence and His promises would mean nothing if God were unable to do what He says He will do.

In our text, we find Abraham and Sarah shocked and amazed for, as we read in verse 1, "the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. The passage continues, **"Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him."**

And when it came time to name the boy, there was no debate. Abraham and Sarah looked at each other and smiled a "knowing" smile. They called him... "Laughter!" That's what "Isaac" means, you see.

Once they had laughed when God told them they would have a child in their old age. Now they were laughing because God had made good on His promise, as He always does. And one day their new born son would also laugh with joy because he would also come to know this God of great surprises.

I love what old doubting Sarah says in verse 6. This woman, who first laughed at the idea that she would actually have a baby, now wants to share the joy and laughter with others: "God has brought me laughter," she says, "and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

And so we do, Sarah—to this day, we're still laughing with you—and with all who know this precious gift of new life!

Friends, we don't really understand what it means to laugh until God makes us laugh—until God makes us laugh with joy because of His loving Presence with us, His wonderful Promises that give our lives meaning and hope, and the blessed assurance we have in Christ Jesus our Lord that God will do what He says.

What a privilege we have to share this great faith--this really Good News--with all God's children wherever they may be in this world. There's plenty of joy and laughter to go around!