June 14, Ordinary 11 (Genesis 18:1–15, 21:1–7)

Sarah wasn’t the first member of her household to laugh at God.

by Greg Carey in the June 3, 2020 issue

The Lord visits Abraham, and Sarah overhears. The two offer very different responses.

Abraham springs into action. His speech and action indicate the posture of a servant, precisely how the patriarch identifies himself in relationship to his “lord.” Three times Abraham scurries—out of the tent, back into the tent, and out to the herd before he returns with a meal. The great patriarch bows when his guests arrive, then stands at attention while they eat. When these visitors pass on to Sodom they will receive no such hospitality, a link explicitly established by our storyteller (18:16–33).

Sarah responds differently. When the Lord promises Abraham a son in a year’s time, Sarah, concealed in the tent, laughs to herself—a little too loudly. The Lord calls Abraham to account for Sarah’s behavior. It is unclear whether Sarah has emerged into public view, but she speaks for herself and denies her laughter.

Running and bowing, serving and laughing: How do mortals respond before the divine presence? How do we receive the divine promise?

Sarah has reason to be suspicious. When Abraham received the divine promise, she was among those who left her familiar country and ventured to a yet-to-be-revealed land. The plan fell apart immediately: famine drove Abraham and his household to Egypt, where he passed Sarah off as his sister and allowed Pharaoh to take her for himself (12:10–20). Sarah was not present when God reinforced the promise to Abraham, but Abraham did not resist her plan to give him the enslaved Hagar as a potential breeding partner. Sarah came to regret that offer. Now Sarah, advanced in age, hears the promise anew: “Your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

Sarah’s laughter had traditionally been read as an expression of bitter irony: having once believed in her promise, she now ridicules it. In this reading Sarah comes off as failing in faith. She does not recognize the visitors’ divine stature, and she has given up hope for her blessing.

But laughter comes in many flavors. After all, Abraham himself has laughed (17:15–22), presumably for the same reasons Sarah does here, and no one criticizes Abraham. Sarah tries to stifle her laughter, but Abraham fell on his face and laughed in the very presence of God. Abraham uttered essentially the same rationale that Sarah offers now: they’re too old to have a child (17:17). So confident was Abraham in his unbelief, he begged God to grant Ishmael standing instead. Throughout the centuries rabbinic interpreters have struggled to make sense of the contrast between Abraham’s laughter and Sarah’s and between the two very different divine responses. Perhaps we should embrace rabbinic curiosity.

We could take Sarah’s laughter more seriously. The promise of a blessed offspring has outlived its likelihood, and the process of aging has taken its toll. The renewed promise is, well, silly. Sarah has already suffered abundantly on account of this promise. So she laughs.

Then she denies it, and this denial is so wonderfully human. We all know what it is to get called out, and we’ve all attempted the hopeless denial. Sarah receives no condemnation from the divine visitor, just a direct insistence on the truth. Abraham and Sarah receive another word as well: nothing is too marvelous for God. The outcome is sure. We know this because we’re reading Genesis, and that is how things go. We should also know because God is capable of the most wondrous things.

The week after Trinity Sunday, we naturally ponder the mystery of this divine visitation. The Lord appears to Abraham, and the Lord confronts Abraham concerning Sarah’s laughter. Clearly this is an epiphany. Abraham immediately recognizes one of the visitors as singular, addressing him as “my lord.” (Many readers will assume that “the Lord” and “my lord” translate the same Hebrew word, and preachers may choose to explain the problem of translating the divine name.) But Abraham sees three men, and he also addresses them in the plural (“refresh yourselves”). Abraham serves “them,” “they” eat, and “they” speak.

Christians naturally ponder a connection between this three-person epiphany and our doctrine of the Trinity. Jewish readers typically say that God sends angels to visit the patriarch. Possibly Abraham recognizes one of the three as the group's divine leader, but the story does not clarify this point. We ought not place too much confidence in our hunches here.

I suspect this story was composed for two primary reasons: to reinforce God's faithfulness in the promise to Abraham and Sarah, and to affirm Israel's enduring covenant with this faithful God. Indeed, Sarah will give birth to Isaac, whose son Jacob/Israel will prove ancestor to the entire nation. And this story echoes the account of the promise concerning Isaac that appears in 17:15–22—an account that has already traced the boy's name to Abraham's laughter, not Sarah's.

Whatever its origins, I am attracted to the narrative realism of this story. It depicts two very different responses to a divine visitation and a promise that makes no ordinary sense. Some among us may recognize God's presence immediately and spring into action. Others, with good reason, may try to hide our laughter. To both responses God remains present and faithful.