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## He laughs

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given June 18, 2017  
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7*

Happy Father's Day. Some of you are fathers. Some of you have fathers who are living and with whom you are connected. Some of you are not fathers although you would have liked to have been. Some of you are not connected with a father figure. Depending on what's going on in your personal life or even in the world around you, Father's Day can be a joyful occasion, and it can also be a painful occasion. My brother Steve and his wife Mary struggled for seven years to have children, and month after month passed by and Steve had still not become a father, and I remember those years when Father's day was difficult for him. I find it just beautiful that today, on Father's day, our lesson from Genesis takes us back to the foundational story of the father of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Abraham, who had yearned to have a child with his wife Sarah all his long life and who, despite the promises of God, had not seen that come to pass.

In today's story we zoom way in to the details of Abraham's strange encounter with three men who represent the presence of God. In keeping with ancient Near Eastern traditions of hospitality, Abraham provides food and drink for his guests, and in the process his guests ask about his wife Sarah. Sarah is an older woman. Abraham is an older man. Yet these strange guests from God say something extraordinary. They say, Sarah will conceive and have a son. And her response is to laugh. It's a "yeah right" kind of laugh.

We should not be too quick to blame her for that laugh. This is not the first time God has promised Abraham and Sarah a son. In fact long ago, when Abram was 75 years old living in another country, God calls him and

Sarai to leave their homeland and travel to Canaan, where God says he will become a great nation, which means among other things that he would have children. They take the risk and follow God, but there is no child. Years pass, and God again appears to Abram, and Abram tells God about the great pain he has in not having a child, and God again promises Abram children, but more years pass, and there is no child. So Sarai and Abram reason that perhaps God means Abram will have a child through other means, and Sarai gives Abram her slave girl Hagar with whom Abram does have a child, Ishmael, eleven years after the original encounter with God. Then Sarai grows too old to have children even if she had not been barren in the first place, and the child Ishmael becomes a teenager, and Abram and Sarai figure this is the way it was meant to happen – not ideal, still leaving some sadness and bitterness in it, but they can accept this outcome. Then God appears to Abram again, and again says you shall have children through Sarah, and again, it does not happen.

So you see, this couple who live in the deepest foundation of Judeo-Christian consciousness, have been without a child despite the promises of God, for twenty five years by the time these three strange men appear at the door of Abraham's tent. Twenty-five years is a very long time to be living with promises that are unfulfilled and that are unfulfillable according to the laws of nature. So yes. Sarah laughs.

And don't we all know that feeling. If you live long enough, we all deal with long, chronic circumstances are not life-giving. Some of us have difficult health conditions that limit our capacity to live the kind of life we would want. Some of us have family relationships that are complicated and painful. And beyond our personal, individual lives, there are chronic situations in our collective lives that beg for resolution when none is in sight. After the verdict of not guilty for the police officer Yanez shooting of Philando Castile this week, many people in this country today are angry and anguished, feeling that the system has denied them justice once again after centuries of injustice and racism. Others don't understand this reaction and think Officer Yanez was justified in his actions, and the two sides seem to be at an impasse. The complicated story of racial tension in our country continues, chronic and difficult as it ever has been, with no

end and no life-giving future in sight. And you know, in all these circumstances, we do our best. We adjust. We all have our Ishmaels, too; we figure out how to live with reality as it is. It's not perfect, and we feel bitter sometimes, but we adapt. We figure out some provisional way to move forward.

That God comes to Abraham and Sarah at this point in their life story, long after their original dream has died, and promises and grants them the son they always wanted, is the foundational imagination in Judeo-Christian consciousness. What this says about our God is that it is exactly when there is no hope at all that God comes and grants life and generativity and a life-giving future that is *not* more of the same. Because what Abraham and Sarah want is not just for themselves. Having a child of their own will grant meaning and purpose to them as a couple, it's true. But their son will carry their name and their legacy into future generations, long after Sarah and Abraham die and return to the earth. This is the kind of God we have. A God who promises and grants a hopeful and generative future when it is impossible. A God for whom nothing is too wonderful, nothing is too difficult. Eventually God grants a son to Sarah and Abraham, a son whose name is Isaac. Isaac means "he laughs." They laugh together; the laughter of bitterness and resignation has become the laughter of joy and astonished healing and every good thing.

And we need this kind of God, the God for whom nothing is too difficult, the God who can convert cynical laughter into big belly laughs of joy and surprise and delight. My brother Steve and his wife Mary after years of infertility, now have three sons, named Isaac, Elijah and Benjamin, all aged ten and younger. You can imagine the energy level in that household. Although the country continues to struggle with real pain about racial relationships, we also have pockets of people of all colors and all religions coming together across lines of difference to ask deep questions about race relations and learn together and cooperate with God's justice, so that we might finally overthrow the legacy of racism that has been a stain on our country since it began. I can't tell you how God will grant a life-giving future in each chronic situation we struggle with. I do know God calls us to walk by faith and not give into hopelessness and cynicism and apathy. I do

know God calls us to continue to love and seek justice and healing where there is bitterness and pain and injustice. In the end I choose to trust the God of Abraham and Sarah, whose promise is always for that which brings blessing to the world even if it seems impossible, blessing and life that carries within it the seeds of more life, life that is generative. May we all be agents of God's life and God's future, a future that overflows with justice and peace and laughter.