

1

How many of you have been part of a family that had a baby, either you or your spouse or someone else gave birth? Starting out as a baby is something we all have in common, and those who prepare for a birth have many things to do to get ready. Decorating a room. Assembling a baby bed. Buying baby clothing, diapers, and toys.

Knowing whether the baby will be a boy or girl can influence these purchases—do I buy pink or blue onesies?—and people have tried a variety of means throughout the years to discern the baby’s gender. Today we have ultrasound technology and can even bring home pictures of the baby before she or he is born, but before this technology, how would one know the gender of the baby?

Some suggested that if mom craves sweets and chocolates, mom would have a girl. A desire for salty tastes indicated it would be a boy.

Others said that if you suspended a ring above the mother’s belly and it swung back and forth, it’s a girl; if it swings in a circle, you’re expecting a boy.

How about this idea: Ask the mother to eat a clove of garlic. If the smell comes through her

pores, it’s a boy. I guess that also means if mom doesn’t stink after 3 days, it’s a girl.¹

When the day finally arrives, it can be a frantic day of getting to the hospital before the baby arrives. One nervous father called ahead to the hospital and excitedly exclaimed, “This is Harold Smith, and I’m bringing my wife in—she’s about to have a baby!”

“Calm down,” the nurse said. “Tell me, is this her first baby?”

“No,” the frantic voice replied, “this is her husband!”²

In the midst of the nervousness, having a baby often brings laughter and joy—even in the early stories in Genesis, laughter is a response to news about a coming birth. God had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have many descendants as the stars in the sky, but as they had entered into their 90s, that promise seemed a bit unlikely. And then one day, God showed up through the presence of three visitors. Abraham welcomed them and asked Sarah to prepare some bread while

2

he went and prepared some hamburgers from his herd of cows.

While the visitors were eating, one of them asked, “Where’s your wife Sarah? Maybe she might like to join us in conversation.

Abraham replied, “She’s in the tent. Why do you ask?”

The visitors replied, “When we return about this time next year, your wife will have a son.”

Sarah happened to overhear the conversation and began to laugh, knowing that she was well beyond her childbearing years. I mean, how would those of you in your 90s respond if someone said you were going to have a baby? Probably laugh as well, right?

Through one of the visitors, God asked, “Why did Sarah laugh? Does she doubt that she can have a child in her old age? I am the LORD! There is nothing too difficult for me. I’ll come back next year at the time I promised, and Sarah will already have a son” (18:13-14 CEV).

No need to see which way a suspended ring swings over her, eat garlic, or have an ultrasound to

determine the gender of the baby. These visitors were quite specific. You will have a baby boy.

Sarah tried to object that she hadn’t laughed, but the visitor replied, “Yes you did.”

Why not laugh? Doctors today suggest that laughter can be healing: it helps us breathe better, stimulates our hearts, and aids muscle relaxation, all which help reduce stress. Laughter can also improve the immune system and reduce pain.³ Why not have a good laugh when hearing something surprising?

Some interpret Sarah’s laughter in a negative way, as a denial of what God can do. But haven’t you ever laughed at amazing news, when joy overflows and you break out in laughter? Think of times when you laughed in response to amazing and overwhelming news. One pastor reflecting on this event wrote:

Sarah could have easily been condemned for her laughter, for her unbelief, for her denial, but she wasn’t. She wasn’t even corrected. I imagine Abraham standing there mortified thinking, “Well, there goes that promised son!” But that’s not how the story unfolds. There is no

3

condemnation of any kind. Just a fulfilled promise, which nothing, not even unbelief or laughter, could get in the way of. That's gospel! That's good news!⁴

A year later, Sarah did have a baby, and she named him יִשְׂחָק (yishaq) or Isaac, which in the Hebrew language means “one who laughs.” Abraham and Sarah were so overwhelmed with joy and laughter that they named their son with a laughing name. Sarah proclaimed, “God has given me laughter. Everyone who hears about it will laugh with me” (21:6, CEB). When later rabbis read this verse about everyone laughing, they saw Sarah's laughter as bringing healing to the world. Rabbi Samuel son of Rabbi Isaac

was quoted as speculating: If one person...rejoices, why should another person...rejoice with him? So also, if Sarah was remembered [and she conceived], why should others rejoice with her? However, when our mother Sarah was remembered, many other barren women were remembered with her, many sick people were healed, many deaf people gained their hearing, many blind people were given their sight, many madmen were

cured of their madness—an amnesty was granted to the world.

R. Levi said: [At Isaac's birth] the Holy One added brilliance to the luminaries. Accordingly, when Isaac was born, all—heaven and earth, sun and moon, stars and planets—rejoiced.⁵

Have you ever noticed how laughter is contagious? When one person begins breaking out in laughter, it leads others to join in with laughter. You might even find humor in church, as was the case one Sunday morning

A small boy sat with his mother in church, listening to a sermon entitled, “What Is a Christian?” The minister punctuated his talk at several key intervals by asking, “What is a Christian?” Each time, he pounded his fist on the pulpit for emphasis.

At one point, the lad whispered to his mother, “Momma, do you know? Do you know what a Christian is?”

“Yes, dear,” the mother replied, “now try to sit still and listen.”

As the minister was wrapping up the sermon, once again he thundered, “What is a Christian?” and pounded especially hard on the pulpit. At that, the boy jumped up and cried, “Tell him, Momma, tell him!”⁶

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If someone walked into our congregation this morning, wondering that question—“What is a Christian?”—I imagine many of us could explain our trust in Jesus and that God sent Jesus into the world to remind us of God’s loving and forgiving nature. But I hope a visitor would also sense the laughter and joy in this place, for as Christians, we celebrate what God is doing in our lives and in the world.

From the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, laughter occurred when Abraham and Sarah learned that they would have a son, and even the name *Isaac* means laughter. Maybe the story serves as a reminder of how holy humor can help sustain our lives, as one woman recalled when she was asked about her life.

On October 16, 1995, Jeanne Calment of Paris was inducted into the Guinness Book of World Records by becoming the oldest human on record—over 120 years of age. She was born on February 21, 1875, a year before the telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell.

Jeanne remembered the construction of the Eiffel Tower and remembered selling colored pencils to the famed Vincent Van Gogh. She survived twenty-seven French presidents during the course of her long life. When asked, “What’s the secret to your long life?” she responded, “Laughter!”⁷

May you celebrate the gift of laughter, joining with God in this wonderful gift of holy humor, enhancing your life and bringing joy to the world.

¹ “15 Wacky Ways to Predict Your Baby’s Gender,” www.babble.com/pregnancy/wacky-at-home-gender-prediction-test/

² Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3100-3102). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #456.

³ “Stress relief from laughter? It’s no joke,” www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456.

⁴ Ron Valadez, <https://clergystuff.com/nl-y2-mark-program-year-isaac-born-to-sarah>.

⁵ Hayim Bialik & Yehoshua Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends, Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, #40.

⁶ Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 1365-1370). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #125.

⁷ Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3401-3406). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #509.