18 And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth 3 and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, 5 while I bring a morsel of 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 went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” 7 And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. 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 Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” 10 The Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” 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 hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” 15 But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”
There is a Russian monastery built by the Church of Russia in 1868. But this monastery is not located in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or anywhere in Russia. It’s not in Europe, or Canada, or the US. It is located 25 miles south of Jerusalem. It’s on a hill overlooking the town of Kiryat Arba, or Hebron as it was known in the days of King David.

Why would the Russians build there? Well, just outside the monastery is a very old oak tree. It is an oak tree that has been treated as a holy site since before the time when Constantine was emperor of Rome. For 2,000 years at least, it’s been a holy site, because that oak tree was part of a stand of oak trees that were called the oaks of Mamre going back to the days of Abraham. The tree at that present-day holy site is believed to be 5,000 years old. Meaning that it was already a few hundred years old when Abraham and Sarah pitched their tents beneath it. Now, that alone would have made the tree special. But it was there by that tree that Abraham and Sarah provided a meal for three visitors. Genesis 18:1. “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as Abraham sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day.” The very place where Abraham stood and where the Lord and His two angels sat eating their lunch could have been this 5000-year-old oak tree.

Yet, a far more important tree, a new seedling was about to be planted by the Lord God. It would be a new family tree, with Abraham as its father and Sarah as its mother. The Lord wanted both of them to have faith. In other words, God did not intend for Sarah to just be a bystander. God did not intend for Sarah to just be a passive participant, to just go along for the ride. God did not intend for Sarah to just stand there like a tree. God was determined to plant a new family tree through the faith of Abraham and through the faith of Sarah. Both would need faith to start the family through which all of the nations were to be blessed.
So, although Abraham was the one who welcomed the three visitors, served the food, and stayed close by as they ate and although Sarah just remained inside the tent, it became clear that this visit was for Sarah. God had already talked privately with Abraham about having a child on two previous occasions. **This visit was for Sarah.**

“Where is Sarah, your wife?” they said. Here they used the new name God had recently given to her. In other words this was God speaking, so of course He already knew where she was. He just wanted to make sure she was listening carefully to what He was about to say. So that she would have faith.

Through faith, through your faith and my faith, God carries out His plans. But faith, like any tree, it needs roots. So, God makes promises. These promises are at the very root of faith. They are what grow our faith, sustain and nourish our faith. God’s promises are what keep our faith going. What are these promises? They are the promises in God’s Word. Just like your Confirmation verse, John 3:16 is a promise to you. Revelation 2:10 is a promise to you. John 14:6 is a promise to you. Romans 8:21 is a promise to you. God has made these promises to His people that we may have faith in Jesus, and that through our faith lived out and acted upon, God may accomplish His plans.

Sarah had a role in God’s plans. So, a promise was given to her, so that it would become faith in her heart, faith that she would then act upon. A promise given to her specifically! Can you imagine how excited Sarah was when she heard that promise for the first time? In that culture it was at the least a disgrace to not bear children and at the worst it was considered a curse from God. Sarah reached age 65 without having a child. Then one day Abraham came running to tell her that God had spoken to him. “We’re going to be leaving our home in the city to live in tents, but you’re going to have a baby!” How excited she was!

Then month after barren month passed by and still no baby. 25 years passed by. 25 years of living in tents went by and still no baby. The promise had not been kept. Did she grow tired? Did feelings or thoughts of disappointment occupy her? Did she become cynical? What do you think that did to her faith?
What can happen to faith over time, even faith like an oak tree? There’s not much that can take out an oak tree, and that includes high winds. They’re not called “the sturdy oak” for nothing.

But even the mighty oak is vulnerable to certain pests. Like the gold spotted oak borer. The gold spotted oak borer lives in families, colonies. They don’t eat bread, veal, curds or milk. They feast on oak trees, boring holes in the tree, eating their way through the tree, eating their way through the veins of the tree, thus cutting off the flow of water and nutrients, killing the tree not all at once. It happens gradually, over time. The same can happen to the strongest faith. Over time, faith can be eaten away by weariness, disappointment, cynical thinking. These pests can gnaw away at faith gradually. As with Sarah. She may have been excited to hear the promise the first time when Abraham told her. But now when God Himself speaks that same promise 25 years later, she just laughs to herself.

Yet, God cared too much about that new family tree that is also His family tree. That is also, by His grace, our family tree. In His grace, He confronts Sarah not once but twice about laughing... because this visit was for her. He confronts her by repeating His promise to her in this first great birth announcement pointing ahead to the one that would be made to Mary. He does this so that by repeating this birth announcement to her, now in person... her weary, disappointed, cynical, eaten away faith might be refreshed. And it was! When Sarah became pregnant only a very short time later, it didn’t happen in spite of cynicism. No, it happened through her faith. So, it says in Hebrews 11:11, “By faith Sarah received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised.” The personal repeating of His promise to her refreshed her faith.

Refreshed. That’s the word Abraham had used when he urged the three visitors to stay awhile. “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, so that you may refresh yourselves.” But in the Hebrew language it actually says, “that you may be refreshed in your hearts.”
Refreshed in your heart is what the Lord God does for your faith. He refreshes it. By inviting you to come and rest under the tree of the cross. Here in this place under the tree of the cross the Lord brings you a morsel of bread and a bit of wine, Christ’s body and blood to refresh you in your heart, to refresh your faith. In His body and blood, Jesus comes to you in person. That’s what He has promised. Yes, here under the tree of the cross Jesus confronts the darkness in you but only so that He can repeat to you His promise of grace and forgiveness in order to refresh your faith.

Refreshed. Ready to go again. The old oak tree at Mamre is dead, but there is a kind of tree that’s just as old and still lives. It is the bristlecone pine. Some gnarled old bristlecone trees have only a thin strip of living bark, which sustains a single living branch and its needles. In a way, these ancient trees have gone back to being seedlings. Like new again. New. Fresh. That’s what Jesus does for your faith. Makes it new, fresh, and ready to go again.

Here we are refreshed in our faith in Jesus and in His promises, ready to go again…. ready to be used in God’s plan.

Amen