My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our Pentecost Holy Spirit and actions, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

God had already told Abraham what would happen. And then the three angels came, and said it again. Sarah laughed, says the text. But what about Abraham? What do you think was his reaction when he found out that he would have a second child, having already conceived a son with Sarah’s handmaiden at Sarah’s request?

 It’s Father’s Day, after all, and Sarah’s promised child would once again make Abraham a dad.

The man who already has a kid with another woman is having a kid with his wife this time. This puts him, even in ancient times, in an uncomfortable position. What do we think Abraham did, having a child in his old age when quite possibly he could no longer have children, just like Sarah? Did he laugh?

 Brad Pitt is 60, and has six kids with his ex-wife, Angelina Jolie. And while their marriage didn’t end in a happily ever after, Brad has moved on to dating Ines de Ramon, almost 3 decades younger than he is, and Ines is pregnant with their child. That means that child will be in college when Brad turns 80. What do we think Brad did when he found out he was having a child in later age? Did he laugh?

Or how about Robert DeNiro, age 79, whose girlfriend Tiffany Chen just had his baby, DeNiro having fathered six kids already? Or Al Pacino, age 83, expecting a fourth child at age 83? What do we think their reactions were when they found out they were going to have a child in their old age, when quite possibly they thought it was not all that possible to do so? Did these tough guys bust out laughing?

What’s in a laugh response? If we were taking a psychological test asking our first response to the word, “laugh”, we probably think of how the old poem about “Twas the Night before Christmas”, where Santa laughs and his belly shakes like a bowl full of jelly. But there are different kinds of laughter, right? Like all things in life, laughter, and how it’s expressed, has to do with situational context.

 Belly laughs are total fun. They’re the ones that we remember because we end up laughing so hard that we are left gasping for air. They’re the laughs that happen where we hear a really good joke or see something so totally absurd or entertaining it’s truly hilarious. But it’s also the hardest type of laughter to experience, because it isn’t something that happens often, and yet, it’s the most honest kind of laughter we have because we can’t fake it. It comes waaaaay down from our gut and just gushes out.

But folks study this stuff, and researchers at Vanderbilt University found that men are more likely to grunt or snort at something funny, while women are more likely to give chuckles or giggles. But let’s not underestimate it. Tickling our funny bone makes us smile, lifts our mood, and makes our day.

 We can laugh politely in social situations. When the boss laughs in a meeting and finds something funny, we smile and chortle, too. We rely on laughter to get along with others, so we tend to laugh to fit in but at things that aren’t belly laugh funny. We also laugh nervously sometimes as a coping mechanism to relieve a stressful situation. And it helps us through times when we want to give the impression that we’re still in control. Think of a presentation and a person giving a bad pun to help give bad news less of an edge. Or a light joke or memory during a funeral or eulogy that breaks up the energy of the grief of the event. It’s a defense mechanism to reduce stress, but sometimes can just be awkward. We don’t want to do this too much, because inappropriate, forced laughter can make us even more stressed out than we were to begin with.

We engage in silent laughter a lot. And this kind of laughter can have great health benefits, and has been compared to engaging in deep breathing exercises or having a good belly laugh. There’s lots of situations where we hold it in, and mindfully practice silent laughter challenges us to keep our mouth closed and our faces break into a smile or open grin. Cheryl Ann Oberg is a therapeutic clown and teaches kids in cancer wards the art of silent laughter. It allows them to fall back asleep when they have awakened from a bad dream and they get the same calming benefits as from a belly laugh but without waking their roommates.

Silent laughter can also turn into something pigeon laughter. That’s when we are doing closed mouth laughter but we end up chuckling or humming in a very specific way so it may sound like we have a bunch of bees buzzing around us. (demonstrate). By keeping our lips sealed, we often smile during these types of laughs, but it gets its name from sounding like a pigeon’s coos, because it happens over and over again. We’re either blowing air out or sucking it in through our nose when we laugh. Just don’t do this when you have just taken a drink or bite of food, or it can turn into a snort with rather disastrous consequences.

But maybe the best part of laughing is the contagious nature of it all. We do this when we’re in groups; one person gets the giggles and others start doing it too. We don’t know why yawning is contagious. But laughter is too, like we have some sort of laugh detector in our brains. In 1962, there was an epidemic of laughter in a school in Tanzania. It started with three students, and eventually spread to 95 of the 159 students, but the teachers were unaffected. Laughing kept up in these kids from 7 hours to 16 days, and the school had to shut down. It spread to surrounding communities, too, such that the outbreaks occurred over 18 months and resulted in 14 schools shutting down for periods of time and over 1000 people affected until the contagious giggles passed.

So back to our text. I’ll ask the fathers in the room: did you laugh when you found out you were going to have a child? What kind of laughter happened, and was it different than you normally respond? And most importantly, did you understand how entirely out-of-control your life would become, and then what kind of laughter overtook you?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Our text doesn’t say whether Abraham laughed, too. But I haven’t met a father yet who didn’t. And I have also never met a father who wasn’t completely overtaken by the awesome feeling that there is a presence, a feeling, bigger than they are in that moment, which will come to be at the center of their life from that moment forward. Did Abraham chortle, snort, belly laugh, or silently smile? Probably all of the above.

Our text doesn’t say. But on this Father’s Day, I can bet you this much: He gave thanks to God, and I hope you do this day and each day, too.

 Amen.