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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Lent 2, Series B
Saturday, February 24th, 2018
Sunday, February 25th, 2018

Sermon: Laughter¹
Text: Genesis 16-18

Focus: God keeps all his promises.

Function: Even when God's Word seems too good to be true, he makes good on his promises.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, Third Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. One of the hardest things about storytelling is knowing what to include and what to leave out. Which scenes in a book or movie are most important? Is there too much description here—or not enough? How much background do we need to give on the characters so the viewer, reader, or hearer can jump in and hit the ground running? And what about the parts you *don't* read or see?

Sometimes I think the editors of our lectionary, the list of assigned Scripture readings for each Sunday, are a bit like film editors cutting and splicing together a 90-minute movie from hours and hours of footage. Out of 66 books of the Bible and tens of thousands of verses, less than 25% of the Bible is read in our worship services. So how do you know which stories to include?

For example, the life of Abraham covers 12 chapters of Genesis, and we only read a few short passages scattered throughout the three-year series. Yet even the order is all out of whack.

¹ This is a revision of an earlier sermon preached on March 4th, 2012, at Epiphany Lutheran Church of Castle Rock, Colorado. As retired and veteran pastors have said to me, "If it was a good sermon in the past, it will be a good sermon again." Jesus also said something like that: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt. 13:52).

For example, last Sunday we heard about the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Today we flashback in time to the Lord's promise that Isaac was going to be born! And there's a lot more that didn't make the cut.

So today I want to focus on what's *left out* of our Old Testament reading—the “Director's cut” and deleted scenes. What comes *after* the Lord renames Abram and Sarai? What happens *after* God's glorious promise to make Abraham a father of many nations and give him a son (Gen. 17:4, 16)?

Well, let's read on in Genesis 17, beginning at verse 17:

“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’ And Abraham said to God, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before you!’ God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year’” (Gen. 17:17-21, ESV).²

So what does Abraham do right after God promises a son (v. 16)? He laughs. He *laughs!*

There are many kinds of laughter. There's the laugh of pleasure at a good joke or a child's silly antics. (Of course, there's the pity laugh when *Pastor* tells a joke!) Then there's the unsettling, maniacal laugh of a madman—like the Joker from *Batman*. And there's the laugh of mockery when people make fun of you. There's the sarcastic laugh of the skeptic, such as when Pontius Pilate quipped to Jesus, “What is truth?” And then there's the sad laugh of disbelief, when you hear something so wonderful, you wish it were so; but it's just too good to be true.

I suspect Abraham's laugh was a great, big, incredulous “Ha! Ha!”³ “Yeah right, God! *Sure* I'm going to have a son! I'm *only* 100 years old, and my 90-year-old wife is still a blushing

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

³ Martin Luther, alternatively, interprets Abraham's laughter as one of great joy.

bride. No problem!” But it was a problem because Abraham was “as good as dead,” in the words of two New Testament writers (Rom. 4:19; Heb. 11:12). And ever since her younger years, Sarah was “barren,” or infertile, unable to have children (Gen. 11:30).

These were the days before fertility drugs and *in vitro* fertilization, so it was going to take a miracle for Abraham and Sarah to get pregnant—and miracles had been promised! They just hadn’t come yet. Abraham was 75 years old when God first promised him a son (Gen. 12:1-7). And as the years went on and the promise didn’t bear fruit, Abraham began to doubt God’s Word.

In Genesis 15, God says to Abram, “Fear not... I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1).

But Abram’s response is basically “What *good* is your Word, Lord, when I still don’t have a son, and a servant boy will be my heir?!” (cp. 15:2).

But God promises Abram a son *from his own body* and swears his descendants will be as many as the stars in the sky (15:4-5). Abram takes heart and *believes* God (15:6). And the Lord reckons it to him as righteousness.

But time wears on, and still no son arrives. Abraham and Sarah lose heart and become discouraged. Their biological clocks stop ticking, and so they take matters into their own hands. Abraham takes Sarah’s servant girl, Hagar, as a second wife, and she gives birth to a son named Ishmael. Finally, at 86 years old, Abraham has a son. (But it’s not a happy home for Sarah!)

Thirteen years go by, and Ishmael becomes the apple of his father’s eye. But Ishmael is a real hothead, a “wild donkey of a man” (16:12), and he isn’t the guy God has in mind. So the Lord promises Abraham a son by his *first* wife, Sarah: “I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and... kings of peoples shall come from her” (Gen. 17:16).

And what does Abraham do? He *laughs*.

We shouldn't be surprised. After all, we can relate to Abraham and Sarah. We know that some things are just too good to be true. We've all gotten our share of "prize notifications" in the mail from various sweepstakes that are really just scams. We know the "age-defying" wrinkle cream you bought from the back of the magazine didn't do the trick—you're still getting old. Politicians rarely deliver on their campaign promises. And that "sure bet" we invested in the stock market or real estate boom turned out to be a bust.

Many of us know people who seemed to beat cancer years ago and were declared "cancer-free," only to have an incurable relapse years later that crippled them and left them for dead. Our parents, spouses, friends, and children have all broken promises, dashed our dreams, and broken our hearts. And we're not so good at keeping promises ourselves. They say, "Time heals all wounds," but we've all known bitter, old shrews and grumpy, old men who can't get over some ancient grudge or grief. Why didn't healing come for *them*?

No, we've all been taken or "had" too many times to trust anyone at their word—including God! A virgin birth? A dead man lives? Free grace? The forgiveness of sins? Those seem more pipedreams than reality. In this world, you get what you pay for and pay for what you do. Nothing in life is free, and the sooner you learn it, the better! So when we hear something that seems too good to be true, we laugh because it probably is.

Abraham laughs and begs God to choose Ishmael instead, the son of the slave girl Hagar. But God says, "No!" He has another plan. Sarah *will* give birth to a son, and they will call his name Isaac, which means "he laughs." Abraham's son will be named Laughter because Abraham laughed. But when Sarah got wind of this plan, she laughed too.

Next scene! Genesis 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. 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... They said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ And he said, ‘She is in the tent.’ 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. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” 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.’ But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. He said, ‘No, but you did laugh’” (Gen. 18:1-15).

This is one of my favorite scenes in all of Scripture: God and Sarah in a he-said-she-said argument. “Yes, you did.” “No, I didn’t.” “Yes, you *did!*” God shows up at their door and reminds the decrepit couple of his promise to give them a son. (*Aside:* We all need reminders of God’s Word now and then—or rather, more often than not! How could we ever get by in life without God’s wonderful promises strengthening and sustaining our faith?)

So the Lord tells Abraham, “By this time next year, you’ll have a bouncing baby on your knee!”

Sarah eavesdrops on Abraham’s conversation with the Lord, and she hears something too good to be true. Nonagenarians don’t ordinarily turn into nannies, let alone mamas! So she laughs. Sarah *laughs* at God’s Word!

God frowns and says, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for God?”

“But I *didn’t* laugh!” she insists, peeking around the curtain of the tent.

“Yes, you did,” replies the Lord. And you can almost see a special sparkle in his eye as he adds, “And you will laugh again!”

Last scene! Months go by. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed (Gen. 18-19). Abraham tangles with a local king (Gen. 20). And finally, we come to Genesis 21:

“The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.’ And she said, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age’” (Gen. 21:1-7).

Nine months from the day Sarah laughed at the Lord, she laughs again because God makes good on his Word. He keeps his promise—as he always does. Wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles—Sarah gets pregnant! We can almost hear the bent, old, pregnant lady laughing and rubbing her tummy every time the baby kicked in her womb. Each day the baby grows, her faith grows with him. “*Isaac*,” she says over and over in her heart. “Isaac—he laughs.”

And when the baby is finally born, Abraham and Sarah *do* laugh. They laugh so hard, they cry tears of joy. They laugh so hard their bellies ache. They laugh because God makes them laugh (21:6). They laugh because their baby boy Isaac laughs—Laughter *laughs!* And everyone who hears their story laughs through all the centuries because God always keeps his promises. The Word that seems too good to be true turns out to *be* true after all.

When is the last time *you* laughed? I don’t mean a sarcastic snicker or a goofy giggle. I mean a real, loud, belly laugh that shakes your body and startles your spirit into joy. When’s the last time you laughed like *that*? It may have been a long time ago. Or maybe you never have. Maybe it was just last week or this morning. (I hope it was). But know this: God is good, and he loves you. And he wants to make you laugh. That’s why God sent his Son Jesus to bear your sin and take away your shame. He carried our doubts and fears to the cross—and he left them there. People laughed at Jesus when we went to wake up a dead girl (Mark 5:40), but Jesus raised her from the dead. And people laughed at Jesus while he died on the cross for their sins, but *he* rose

from the dead on the third day. Not one of God's promises has ever failed (Josh. 21:45). He always keeps his Word! And all of his promises find their YES in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:19-20).

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, you can laugh for joy, knowing that you have a good and gracious God who loves you, forgives your sins, and keeps his promises to do you good—*especially* when they seem too good to be true. I don't know how or when, or whether it will be in this life or the next, but God will make good on every promise he's ever made to you. Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you *shall* laugh" (Luke 6:21). You *shall* laugh! You *will* laugh! That's a promise. The cross and empty tomb are your guarantee.

On the Last Day when Christ returns, he will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 7:17; 21:4). He will turn our "mourning into dancing" (Ps. 30:11) and our disappointment into hope. He will fill our mouths with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy (Job 8:21). On that Day we will laugh, *really* laugh, and Jesus will laugh with us. Even if you're frustrated, angry, tired, sad, or bitter right now, God is going to make you laugh. And the laughter will never end. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.