Foundational Stories #2 of 24:

"The Promised Son"

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Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

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I got home from Pine Ridge eight days ago, after a very meaningful week learning about the history, culture, and spirituality of the Lakota people, seeing some really bright spots of hope in several different parts of the Reservation, participating in some powerful commemorations of important events and people, experiencing what feel like a lot of internal tensions and contradictions about life on the Rez, hearing some incredible presentations, and having a lot of rich conversations. This time I learned a Lakota song and I learned several Lakota dances – not that I could repeat any of that for you now! Every time I go out there I feel like I am walking on holy ground, and every time I return home with more things to ponder than I did the time before. It is a special place. It was a sacred week.

It's a long drive home – nearly 16 hours in the car – across hundreds of miles of the Great Plains. As we were making our way across the Midwest I started to think about the rest of my summer, and the question occurred to me: "What am I going to preach on this summer?" I had not, at that point, given the question any thought. I pulled up the lectionary and I started looking through it. The Gospel readings cover a huge chunk of Matthew's Gospel. The New Testament readings walk through most of Paul's *magnum opus*, his magisterial epistle to the Christians in Rome, followed by his letter to the folks in Philippi and his first letter to the church in Thessalonica. There are a bunch of Psalms, of course, the great prayer book of the Bible. And then there are the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we Christians call the Old Testament. There are two separate tracks. One set of readings complements the Gospel passage for each Sunday. The other set of readings walks sequentially through the foundational stories in the first several books of the Bible. There's the call of Abraham, the wedding of Isaac and Rebekah, Esau selling his birthright, Jacob's ladder, tricky Laban, Jacob's four women and thirteen children, Joseph and his "amazing technicolor dreamcoat," Moses in the bulrushes, the burning bush, the exodus from Egypt, manna in the wilderness, the Ten Commandments, Moses's farewell address as he looks out over the Promised Land, Joshua and crossing the Jordan, and finally Deborah, the first female leader of the Israelite people. I skimmed through these stories and my heart started to flutter. These are *amazing* stories. Stories about very ordinary people who do some very extraordinary things. People with personal strengths and personal flaws; people who sometimes make great decisions and at other times terrible ones; people who sometimes are really good at listening to God and at other times are really bad at that. They are very *human*. Generally speaking, they *try* to be faithful, but often they screw things up. The Bible does not glorify them; it does not put any of them up on a pedestal; none of them are perfect. In short, these are people *just like us*. They lived in a very different world than ours, but human nature hasn't changed. These are people we can *relate* to. And, maybe, *learn* from.

There are 24 of these stories, stretching across the summer and fall. These are *foundational* stories. If someone were to ask me what parts of the Bible they should read in what order, I would tell them, start with the Gospels first; learn about Jesus: who he was, what he did, what he said. Then, come back here, to these stories that predate Jesus by more than a thousand years. These are the stories that set the stage for everything that follows. This is where the Gospel story *really* begins, when God says to Abraham, "Go!", and Abraham goes. Karen told you that story last week. She didn't know it, and I hadn't fully realized it yet, but she was giving part 1 of this 24-part series on these foundational stories. I know, some of you may be thinking that a 24-part series is *very* long. If you're thinking that, let me just remind you that the World Cup consists of *104 separate games*. That makes 24 seem like nothing!

In case you missed last week, here's where we are. There was a man named Abraham, originally called Abram, who lived in the city of Ur, in the southern part of Mesopotamia, the Fertile Crescent, what is now the country of Iraq. Ur was a major Sumerian city-state, originally founded about 38 centuries before Jesus was born. It was a place of commerce, trade, politics, literature, and religion. Here is a picture of the reconstructed remains of the ancient ziggurat of Ur, which was constructed some 21 centuries before Jesus. It was a temple to the Sumerian moon god, one of their many deities.

According to the traditional Jewish chronology, Abraham was born in the Hebrew calendar year 1948, which corresponds to 1813 BC ("before Christ") or BCE ("before the common era"). He was a Sumerian; his family worshiped the Sumarian gods and goddesses, yet nowadays the world's three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – all trace their origins back to Abraham. According to Genesis, Abraham's father decided to leave the city of Ur with some members of his family and travel northwest along the Euphrates River, a *very* long ways, some 600 miles, to the city of Haran, in what is now modern Turkey. This group of travelers consisted of Abraham, Abraham's father Terah, Abraham's wife Sarah, and Abraham's nephew Lot. They settle there in Haran. But after some period of time, when Abraham was 75 years old – *75 years old!* – God told Abraham to *go*. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3) Abraham *went*, undertaking *another* very long journey, to the land of Canaan, which would later be called Palestine and is today the country of Israel. By this point Abraham's father has died, but Abraham is accompanied by his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot, along with a large number of servants his family had acquired in Haran – for they were wealthy and privileged. The distance from Haran to the city of Shechem, their first major stop in the land of the Canaanites, was about 450 miles. So Abraham and Sarah and Lot's *entire* journey, from Ur to Haran to Shechem, was almost exactly the same distance as from here to Pine Ridge. Those of you who have been to Pine Ridge before – imagine *walking* all that way, hundreds of miles under the blazing sun – and never, *ever* coming back home.

They explore the land. God says: "To your offspring I will give this land." (Genesis 12:7) Mind you, the land was already inhabited; this was the home of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Here begins the tension that still troubles that land to this very day: *whose land is it?* God says it will belong to Abraham's offspring. What, then, will become of the people who were already living there? What became of the people who were living there in 1948, when the country of Israel was founded? What became of the people who were living *here* when white settlers arrived? What happens when one group of people wants to take land that's lived on by another?

That's one problem. Here's another one. God promises to give the land to Abraham's offspring. But Abraham doesn't *have* any offspring. He is 75 years old. His wife Sarah is 65. They had not managed to have any children earlier in their marriage – in Genesis 11:30 we are told that Sarah was barren – and now they are well past the child-bearing years. But God reiterates the promise: "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted." (Genesis 13:16) Again: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be." (Genesis 15:5) And Abraham believes God.

For a while. But time passes, and nothing happens. *Ten years* pass. Abraham is 85. Sarah is 75. There is still no child. Sarah decides that enough is enough. If Abraham is going to have a child, he's going to need someone other than *her* to bear it. She tells Abraham to take a second wife, Sarah's own servant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar. Abraham complies; Hagar gets pregnant; she bears a son, Ishmael. There's a whole set of stories surrounding Hagar and Ishmael, and some bitter tears, and some remarkable faith, and some equally remarkable promises. We'll talk about all of that next week.

But God still has plans for Sarah. Another *thirteen years* go by. Abraham is now 99. Sarah is 89. God appears to Abraham again, saying: "You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.... I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you." (Genesis 17:4, 6) God is not talking about Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, but the as-yet-unconceived child of Abraham and Sarah. "I will bless her and also give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." (Genesis 17:16) For Abraham, this is too much. Too impossible. Too inconceivable, figuratively *and* literally. So he *laughs*. He laughs at God's promise, saying to himself: "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" Abraham does not believe God can (or will) do what God is promising.

What has happened to Abraham's faith? Years earlier, he had believed God. But now, after all this time, after all these unfulfilled promises, Abraham is giving up. He doesn't believe God anymore. But God does not chastise Abraham for his lack of faith; God does not rebuke him; God does not punish him. God simply repeats the promise one more time. "Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac." (Genesis 17:19) Again: "My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." (Genesis 17:21) It doesn't matter whether or not Abraham believes the promise. God's going to keep the promise, *regardless* of Abraham's faith, or lack of faith.

God shows up one more time. "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him." (Genesis 18:1) This is the first and (perhaps) the only time in the entire Bible when God appears in the form of three persons. The traditional Christian interpretation is that this is the three persons of the Trinity: God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord; and the Holy Spirit of God. If you're looking for traces of Jesus in the Old Testament, well, here's one of them. He's standing there, talking to Abraham, his distant ancestor. (Wrap your mind around that!)

Abraham recognizes that he is in the presence of God; he runs to meet them, bows down to the ground, and addresses them as "Lord." He invites them to wash their feet, rest under the tree, drink some water and eat some food. He runs into the kitchen and tells Sarah to quickly prepare three flour cakes, then he runs to one of his servants, telling him to prepare a calf, and in short order Abraham returns to his divine visitors, with a little meal of beef, milk, curds, and bread. One of the Three then

repeats the promise one more time: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." (Genesis 18:10) How many times has God promised them that son? God makes *so* many promises to Abraham, I have trouble keeping track of them all. This time, Sarah hears it with her own ears. Remember, she's 89. The narrator politely says, "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." (Genesis 18:11) So Sarah does exactly the same thing that Abraham had done before: she laughs. She laughs at God's promise, saying to herself, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?" (Genesis 18:12) Now when Abraham had laughed, God had simply reiterated the promise. But when Sarah laughs, God responds differently. God says to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." (Genesis 18:13-14) God reiterates the promise, but there's more to it this time. Is God rebuking Sarah? If so, why rebuke her and not Abraham? They *both* had laughed. That doesn't seem fair. And when Sarah laughs, why does God ask *Abraham* about it? If God has a question for Sarah, why not ask her directly? The narrator says "Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh,' for she was afraid." What is she afraid of? *God?* Or is she afraid because she is contemplating the possibility of what this would *mean*? Becoming pregnant at the age of 89?!? In the end we are left with more questions than answers. Who are we to know the mind of God? God simply says to Sarah, "Yes, you did laugh." If this is a rebuke, it's not a very strong rebuke. God is simply stating a fact. Yes, Sarah laughed.

Finally, after all this time, it happens. Sarah conceives. "The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him." She is now 90; he is now 100. Imagine, you women, giving birth at the age of 90. Imagine, you men, bringing a son into the world at the age of 100. Here are two very ordinary people who, with God's help, do something extraordinary. Abraham names the child as God had directed him a year earlier, he gives him the name Isaac. Do you know what the name "Isaac" means? "He laughs." That's right. *He laughs.* Abraham had laughed; Sarah had laughed; their child's name will always be a reminder to them of their laughter, their disbelief. But now they are laughing for a different reason. They are laughing with joy. Laughing with amazement. Who would have thought that a 90-year old woman and a 100-year old man could bear a son? Sarah holds her baby in her arms, cuddling him, snuggling with him, even – we are told – *nursing* him. She smiles and says, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." Finally, at long last, one of God's most important promises to Abraham has come true. There were more promises; oh, yes, there were more; promises about many descendants, and nations, and kings, and the entire land that they are living in. God will fulfill all those promises as well. In due time. For God *is* as good as God's *word*.

The most important lesson here is simply this: Abraham and Sarah both reached a point in their lives where they didn't believe God. They lost faith in God. They didn't believe that God would or could do what God had promised. But they were wrong. God *always* comes through. There may be times in our lives when we reach a similar point. We stop trusting God. We lose faith in God. We don't believe that God would or could do what God has promised. So we *laugh* at God. If this ever happens to you, if you ever reach that point in your faith journey, remember Abraham and Sarah. Remember how they laughed at God. And remember, later, when God came through and fulfilled the promise, they laughed *with joy*. Because God will *always* come through. *Always.* God *will* fulfill God's promises. *All* of them.

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