

“PROMISES TO KEEP”

Genesis 18:1-15

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Homewood, AL – June 15, 2008

One day, good old Charlie Brown is talking to Lucy. “If I tell you something,” he says, “will you promise not to laugh?” Lucy replied, “I promise.” “This is very personal and I don’t want you to laugh,” Charlie repeats. And Lucy swears, “You have my solemn promise.” Charlie Brown then confesses, “Sometimes, late at night I lie awake listening for a voice that will cry, ‘We like you, Charlie Brown.’” “Ha, Ha, Ha,” Lucy cackles, breaking out in uncontrollable laughter. Poor old Charlie Brown. So much for promises.

There are all kinds of laughter. There is the joyful laughter of children at play. There is the nervous laughter that we sometimes use to mask our anxieties and fears. When we watch something like America’s Funniest home videos, we laugh at our human foibles and faux pas. And then, there is the Lucy’s laughter – a kind of dismissive taunt. “There’s no way that will ever happen,” Lucy is saying. This is the kind of laughter we find in the story of Sarah – the dismissive laughter of incredulity.

Standing at the entrance to their tent one day, Sarah eavesdropped on her husband Abraham as he talked with three travelers who were visiting. The three travelers made a promise, “About this time next year, Sarah your wife will bear a son.” Immediately Sarah began to giggle to herself. Sarah was an old woman – closer to being in a nursing home than in an infant nursery. Her child-bearing years were long gone. “Have I grown old, my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” She laughs to herself. It wasn’t the laughter of joy, it was the laughter of disbelief. We would have laughed too. In 35 years of visiting folks in retirement homes, I have never met a resident who was expecting a baby.

God heard Sarah’s laughter and confronts her. Trying to cover up, Sarah lies, “I didn’t laugh, it must have been someone else, because it wasn’t me.” She was afraid, thinking that it was probably not a good thing to laugh at God. But God does not shame Sarah. In fact, God has the last laugh, because sure enough, Sarah conceives and bears a son. They name this son, Issac, which in Hebrew means, “he laughs.” “God has brought me laughter, Sarah says, “and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. . . .I have born a son in my old age.” (21:1-7)

Lucy breaks her promise to Charlie Brown, and laughs at him. God keeps his promise to Sarah, and brings her laughter. This is a story about promises. Promises made and promises kept. When the way ahead seems utterly impossible, God makes a way, opening the future. Even when it seems laughable, preposterous, impossible, God makes the future possible, by keeping his promises.

But like Sarah, we often have a hard time when it comes to promises. We have grown up watching enough television to learn that not all is as promised: our teeth don’t get as white as

promised by the commercials; our hair doesn't grow back as promised; the gray doesn't just disappear as promised. And so, we like Sarah have learned to be a bit skeptical when it comes to promises.

We are in an election year, when politicians of all stripes will make us promises, many of which will never be kept. Woodrow Wilson promised to keep the U.S. out of World War I. Herbert Hoover promised to end poverty. Franklin Roosevelt promised to keep us out of World War II. Richard Nixon promised to quickly end the Vietnam War. George H. Bush promised no new taxes. And so, when we hear the promises, we kind of laugh to ourselves.

Each year tens of thousands of couples stand up and promise to take each other for better or worse, until they are parted by death. But something like 70% of these promises will not be kept.

Is it little wonder that we find the whole notion of promises somewhat laughable. Come on, we live in the real world where there are no guarantees and therefore no promises. Beside, we want to keep all our options open, not commit to anything. If we do make a promise, we look for the loopholes. When I was a child, and someone asked you to make a promise, if you crossed your fingers and hid them behind your back, or in your pockets, you didn't have to keep your promise. Everybody knows promises are made to be broken.

Part of the problem is that when we hear the word promise we tend to think of something that is negative. To make a promise is confining, it is something that limits our freedom and reduces our options. If I promise something, what if something better happens along. When we get married we promise to forsake all others. No more playing the field. Better to avoid making promises so that we can keep our options open. We like being free agents, keeping our fingers crossed.

Robert Frost's classic poem, *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*, ends with the stanza:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

It's true that there is much in life that is alluring and lovely – much that calls to us. And we would like to have it all, wander from one thing to the next with little attachment. But as Frost so clearly recognizes, there is always a choice to be made in life between the temporary distractions and enduring commitments. And, it is the commitments we make, the promises we have to keep, which give shape and meaning to our lives.

The word “promise” is interesting. It has two meaning: first, “promise” is defined as an expectation of future good. We say things like, he is a promising athlete, or a promise artist. We expect great thing of him. His future is bright. He or she will go far. Already we can see the promise of things to come.

But second, “promise” also means commitment. When we sign a promissory note committing ourselves to paying back the money we borrow. When we tell somebody, I promise to

pick you up at 7:00, they expect us to be there by 7:00. A promise is a contract. It says we will do what we say we will do.

The two meanings are related. Promise – the expectation of future good – is based on the promises that we make. For a promise to be fulfilled, a promise has to be made and kept. Someone may be a promising athlete or artist, but they will not reach their promise unless they set goals, work hard, make promises to themselves that they keep.

In his book *Seven Habits of Effective People*, Stephen Covey says that the power to make and keep promises to ourselves is the essence of developing the basic habits of effectiveness. When we make a promise and are true to it, we build that strength of character that makes possible every other positive thing in our lives. Private victories – promises made to ourselves and kept – precede public victories.

The woods may be lovely, dark and deep, but the truth is, we can get lost in the woods. We can spend our lives wandering aimlessly and never really get anywhere. The promises we make create our lives. When we make a promise, we are setting our lives on a certain course. When we give our word and keep it, we are creating the future.

“Your wife Sarah will have a son,” Abraham was promised. It was a laughable promise. But the promise was kept – Sarah bore Isaac. And, a different future was created for Abraham, Sarah and the whole of the human race because of it. God had promised to bless all the people of the earth through Abraham. But, if he had gone childless, the promise would have died with him. Through the birth of Isaac – this child of old age, this laughable impossibility – God created a covenant people who would know him and serve him. And through them, opened the way for all of us to know God’s grace and redemption.

Lewis Smedes writes that “we, as people, are most like God when we forgive, and when we keep a promise.” When we make a promise, we are taking a hand in creating our own future. When we promise something to ourselves or to another, we are not binding ourselves, we are creating the future that we want.

In the play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, by Thornton Wilder, there is a scene where Sabrina says to her husband, “I didn’t marry you because you were perfect. I didn’t even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn’t a house that protected them; and it wasn’t our love that protected them, it was that promise.”

Promises make life work. The promises we make create a future that we could not otherwise enjoy. “God has brought me laughter,” Sarah says, “and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me...I have borne a son in my old age.”

But vice versa, when we don’t make promises, or fail to keep our promises, life can become chaotic.

A recurring theme in the Peanuts comic strip had Lucy and Charlie Brown practicing football. Lucy holds the ball for Charlie’s placekicking but every time he would approach the ball to kick with all his might, Lucy would pick up the ball, and Charlie would fall flat on his back.

One particular strip opened with Lucy holding the ball, but Charlie Brown refuses to kick it. Lucy begged him to kick the ball. But Charlie Brown said, "Every time I try to kick the ball you remove it and I fall on my back."

They went back and forth for the longest time and finally Lucy broke down in tears and admitted, "Charlie Brown I have been so terrible to you over the years, picking up the football like I have. I have played so many cruel tricks on you, but I have seen the error of my ways! I've seen the hurt look in your eyes when I've deceived you. I've been wrong, so wrong. Won't you give a poor penitent girl another chance?"

Charlie Brown was moved by her display of grief and responded to her, "Of course, I'll give you another chance." He stepped back as she held the ball, and he ran. At the last moment, Lucy picked up the ball and Charlie Brown fell flat on his back. Lucy's last words were, "Recognizing your faults and actually changing your ways are two different things, Charlie Brown!"

Life works to the degree that we keep our promises. Broken promises land us flat on our back. When something goes wrong, the problem can often be traced back to a broken promise. Two nations make a treaty, and peace follows...until one or the other breaks the treaty and violence ensues. When two people get married, promises are made, and if those promises are broken, families fall apart. When we give birth to a child, we are making a promise that we will nurture and provide the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health of that child. If we break that promise, children grow up unsure of themselves, and the world becomes a less secure place. Promises are not made to be broken. Promises are made to be kept. Keeping promises is what makes life work.

Sarah laughs at God's promise. But God doesn't laugh back at her. God doesn't chide Sarah. God doesn't revoke his promise because of her disbelief. What God does is to keep his promise to her, and through Sarah, to all of us.

The Good news is that God keeps his promise even when we don't. If you will lead us out of slavery, we will serve you, the Israelites promised. God did, but they didn't. If you will save us from our enemies, we will do justice and live with righteousness. God did and they didn't. "Lord," Peter promised Jesus, "I will never desert you, deny you..." But he did.

Once a promise is broken it is broken. Given our record of broken promises, God has no reason to keep his promises to us. But God does. You and I may cross our fingers when we make a promise, but Christ was different. When he promised to love us, forgive us, heal us, save us, he didn't have his fingers crossed. Instead, he bore a cross to fulfill his promise. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in Christ," Paul writes. It is God's promise to love us, forgive us, heal us, save us, that makes it possible for us to fulfill the promise of our lives. It is God's promise that makes it possible to pick up the pieces of our broken promises and to dare to hope, dream and promise again.

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