

Genesis 18:1-25, 21:1-7

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Mark 10:27-31

Lay Minister

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First Lutheran Church

“Blessed”

Marshall, MN

May the words off my lips and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you Lord, my savior, our redeemer, the sustainer. Amen



In the first reading today, a promise is made. This promise had already been made 25 years prior in Genesis chapter 12 when God told Abraham that He would bless him and make his descendants into a great nation. (Genesis 12:2) However, this promise was thought to have been lost by Abraham and Sarah. They had already taken the matter into their own hands and orchestrated a *soap opera worthy story* of their housemaid becoming a surrogate mother. Like most things that we take into our own hands, this does not work out as Sarah and Abraham had planned. There is much animosity and frustration in Abraham's home.

Now in this verse that we read today, three travelers enter the scene. Abraham senses that these individuals are very special people and he and Sarah go all out making a feast and welcoming them with all the hospitality they can offer. The men relax and watch what is about to unfold. Sarah at the age of 89 and Abraham at the age of 99, scurry about waiting on the men. Knowing Sarah can hear him, one of the men tells Abraham that he will return in a year and Sarah will have her and Abraham's child in her arms. Sarah laughs to herself in disbelief and shock. (Like any of us would.) She then becomes the focus of the conversation. Even though she did not say what she was thinking out loud, the visitors recognize her doubt and call her out on it. This exchange results in what the child will be named, *Isaac*. Isaac means laughter and anyone who hears about a child being born to a 90-year-old woman would likely laugh in one way or another.

The gospel reading comes from Mark 10, which is a deep chapter of parables and lessons. The story that we are joining is about the rich man who came to Jesus wanting to know what he needed to do to enter the kingdom of God. This man says he has kept all the commandments

since he was young. It seems he may have been looking for Jesus's stamp of approval, not another task.

Jesus challenged him to give away everything he had to the poor. This holy and good man, cannot bring himself to do this. He was not willing to give up what he thinks he had earned on his own.



Do you see yourself in either of these stories?

Being human we doubt.

We take pride in what we have earned and worked for.

We try to change the outcome of our situations by inserting our human solutions or self-justifications.

We try to humanize God and rationalize what happens to us. ***I know I do these things.***

I recently listened to a humbling message from Katie Bowler, a young mother who had just obtained her dream job, published a new book, and at the age of 35 was feeling very “blessed” in her marriage and life. That is until she found out she had incurable stage four cancer. Katie, a professor at Duke University was an expert on the *Prosperity Gospel*. She had traveled all over the world and interviewed dozens of “megachurch prophets”. The prosperity gospel is the belief that one’s financial and physical wellbeing is related to their level of faith, their good works, their acts of charity, and their strenuous prayer. Prosperity theologians believe that if you do enough good and right things you will be blessed by God. They also believe if you obtain a life-threatening disease or your child was killed in a tragic accident; *somehow* this was God’s plan. They publicly or secretly believe you must have done something to deserve this punishment.

Americans love the prosperity gospel. It is the American way. If you work hard enough, dream big enough, and make all the right sacrifices you will succeed. But this theory does not take into consideration that we cannot control or dictate how the world works or how God works. God has made a promise to all of us that he will come again to judge the living and the dead. **It is ONLY through the death and resurrection of Christ that we have worth and are justified.** This has nothing to do with how much money we give, how hard we work, or how often we

pray. Those things should be done without anticipation of a reward and in gratefulness for what we have or have been given.

Dr. Peter Levine coined the phrase in his book *Freedom from Pain*, “Pain is mandatory, suffering is optional.” Experiencing pain is part of being human. At some point, it will find you and it does not care what type of Christian you are.



The gospel is true! It is the only true source of hope in the world. God’s promise will reach fulfillment, but not as we wish or according to our stopwatch. God is merciful, good, and all-powerful, but God does not control everything. If you believe he does how can you explain why little children are raped and tortured, why one home survives a tornado and not another, and how God allowed the Holocaust and so many other horrific tragedies to occur.

**The truth is that God does not always save us from sin, pain, or death because he has already conquered these things.** We are the ones afraid of these things. So, we try to save our own skins by tying our own actions to our destiny. **But we do not have to be afraid.** Jesus has given us redemption and the Holy Spirit to guide us and allow us to experience grace. It is through the gift of faith that we can laugh as Sarah did. Laughing in the face of death, in the midst of pain, and in the heartache of life.

We are not good or bad, we are **both and** so much more. “Suffering and death have no ultimate meaning,” according to David Bentley Hart, an American theologian and well respected author who wrote an important response to the 2004 tsunami. He shares that as humans we want to find meaning and purpose, therefore we quote karma or sight justice, trying to make God into an accountant, who is balancing the transactions. Hart states that “Our faith is in a God who comes to rescue His creation from the absurdity of sin and emptiness of death...Christ takes the suffering of his creatures up into his own”. God does not need us to suffer for him, but he walks with us in our suffering.

Freedom, peace, and healing come from letting yourself feel the pain, admitting your faults, and sitting in the muck of this messy world.



**Joy is present here**, we just have to let ourselves experience it.

The paradox of trauma, as defined by Dr. Levine is that it has both “the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect.” ***Christ does not need us to suffer or cause us to suffer because death and sin are not the end for us.*** Victory is yet to come for those here and those who have pasted. It is this hope that carries us on. As it says in Revelation 21:4 “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Laughter will prevail. God will provide eternal life to those with even just the *smallest* gift of faith. Joy comes in God’s fulfillment of his promises. Even if we have to wait a quarter of a century as Sarah did, we will see that God is faithful to those who love him.