**Introduction for Stories of the Promise**

An Advent Tea or Advent by Candlelight is a wonderful opportunity for women of all ages to set aside the frenzy of the Christmas season. They can sit quietly to meditate upon the words and promises of God through the Advent and Christmas seasons.

For our midweek Advent worship, we are using a series entitled “Stories of the Promise” created by Pastor Marques and Corissa Nelson.

Pastor Zarling has written letters from three women of the Promise – Sarah, Rahab and Ruth. These three ladies all of their own unique issues – Sarah is a childless senior citizen; Rahab is a prostitute from the heathen nation of Canaan; and Ruth is a young widow from the heathen nation of Moab. Yet all three ladies are drawn into God’s family of forgiveness. The Seed of the Savior comes from their family tree.

Each of these ladies have written a fictional letter to present-day women. Within these letters are woven the Holy Spirit’s scriptural narrative of these Women of the Promise.

Listen and meditate this Advent season on their stories of laughter, judgment and redemption.

In Christ, the fulfillment of the Promise,

Rev. Michael D. Zarling

Sarah: Dear Sisters,

My story is one of patience and trust; patience on the Lord’s part as my faith faltered, and learning patience as he taught me to trust him. My story really started when most women would be concluding theirs. My life was pretty normal, except that I had no children. Then, when I was about 65, the Lord decided to send my husband and me to a distant country.

Reader: Genesis 12:4-5 **4**So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. **5**Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot his brother’s son, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to travel to the land of Canaan. Eventually they arrived in the land of Canaan.

Sarah: We had some bumps along the way, but eventually we settled down, and the Lord continued to bless us. He even promised my husband that he would give us an heir, not only that, but that Abram’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky!

Reader: Genesis 15:2-5 **2**Abram said, “Lord God what can you give me, since I remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” **3**Abram also said, “Look, you have given me no offspring, so a servant born in my house will be my heir.”

**4**Just then, the word of the Lord came to him. God said, “This man will not be your heir, but instead one who will come out of your own body will be your heir.” **5**The Lord then brought him outside and said, “Now look toward the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” He said to Abram, “This is what your descendants will be like.”

Sarah: That wasn’t the first time God had promised descendants, but I was already old, and figured that maybe God didn’t mean for me to produce an heir for my husband. So I thought maybe I’d help the plan along. I decided to give my maidservant to my husband so she could produce for him an heir.

Reader: Genesis 16:3-4a **3**After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took her servant girl, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. **4**He went to Hagar, and she conceived.

Sarah: My impatience and failure to trust the Lord’s promises caused definite problems between my maidservant and me. But the Lord, even then, continued to teach me patience by letting me wait thirteen more years before he would repeat his promise.

Reader: Genesis 17:1,2,15,16 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless. **2**I will make my covenant between me and you, and I will make your descendants very numerous.” … **15**God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai anymore, but her name will be Sarah. **16**I will bless her and even give you a son by her. Yes, I will bless her, and she will be a mother of nations. Kings of many peoples will come from her.”

Sarah: The Lord was much more specific this time, and included another, more important promise!

Reader: Genesis 17:19,21 **19**God said, “No, Sarah, your wife, will bear a son for you. You shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. … **21**But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear for you at this set time next year.”

Sarah: The Lord in his wisdom came to visit soon after he made that beautiful promise. Sadly, I did not recognize him for who he was, so when he told my husband that I’d have my own child within a year, I laughed.

Reader: Genesis 18:10-12 **10**One of the men said, “I will certainly return to you when this season comes around next year. Then Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Sarah was listening to this from the tent door, which was behind him. **11**Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well into old age. Sarah was past the age for childbearing. **12**Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, will I have pleasure, since my Lord is also old?”

Sarah: Much to my shame, when caught in my unbelief, I tried to cover with a lie.

Reader: Genesis 18:13-15 **13**The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really give birth to a child though I am old?’ **14**Is anything impossible for the Lord? At the set time next year I will return to you, and Sarah will have a son.”

**15**Then Sarah denied it and said, “I did not laugh,” because she was afraid.

The Lord said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

Sarah: Despite my unbelief, impatience and weak faith, my compassionate Lord was forgiving and patient. Exactly as he’d promised, one year later I was blessed to hold that precious little baby in my arms. We named our son “Isaac” which means “he laughs.” Our son was given that name because when God told my husband that his long-awaited son would finally come, Abraham laughed. His was an expression of unbelievable joy. Abraham later told me he was thinking, “Everybody knows ninety-year-old women don’t have babies! But nobody told that to God!” Abraham laughed in joyful amazement.

When I held my son in my arms, I announced, “God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.”

Reader: Genesis 21:1-3 The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. **2**Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age, at the set time which God had announced to him. **3**Abraham named the son who was born to him—the son whom Sarah had borne to him— Isaac.

Sarah: My sisters, I hope you have been able to learn much from my example. The Lord, in his wisdom, taught me patience and trust. He took me away from my family, from the only home I knew. He continued to bless Abraham and me even as we failed to trust him. He heard me pray for many years for the blessing of a child. He heard me weep as I learned my servant had conceived. He felt my anguish as my husband named his son. He made many promises of his Son, which I never had a chance to see fulfilled. He allowed me to feel the consequences of my failing trust, but he took my mistakes and turned them into good. I faced many trials, my faith failed at times, but he was there every moment, sustaining me, teaching me, loving me.

As you go through the rush and anxiety of this season, I hope you can learn from my mistakes and remember many things. He is there with you in everything. His answers to your prayers may be delayed. He may lead you in a direction you have not anticipated, one that you fear. He allows you to feel pain, but he continues to be with you. He knows you falter in your faith. He knows every moment you do not trust him. As he never left me, he never leaves you. He is teaching you patience, as he taught me. He wants you to trust him in everything. He kept every promise he made to Abraham and me. He keeps his promises to you. Though he does not come to you as he did to us, he is there. He has given you his Word, his promises, his Son. He promises he will never leave or forsake you. He is with you my sisters, every moment; sustaining, teaching, and loving you.

As great of a blessing as my son, Isaac, was to me, I had an even greater blessing. This is a blessing you can enjoy, too! God’s Son is also my Son! God promised my husband that all nations would be blessed through him. And that has happened through Jesus! Jesus is the descendant of my husband, Abraham, my son, Isaac, and my grandson, Jacob.

Isaac, Jacob and Jesus are my physical heirs. Through faith in Jesus you have become God the Father’s spiritual heirs.

Reader: Galatians 3:28-29 **28**There is not Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one and the same in Christ Jesus. **29**And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants and heirs according to the promise.

Sarah: I say it again, God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me!

This Advent season ladies, let’s fill our homes, churches and lives with joyful laughter!

Your sister in Christ,

Sarah

Song: One Small Child

* *Adapted from Letters from Biblical Women written by Jackie Pudlo*
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Rahab: Dear Sisters,

My story is one of judgment.

 I knew judgment was coming. All the citizens of Jericho knew, too. We heard what the Israelites’ God had done to the Egyptians with the plagues and drowned the Egyptian Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea. We heard how God had destroyed the Amorites. Even though we were physically stronger and bigger than the Israelites (Numbers 11:28-33), even though we had had a huge wall fortifying our city of Jericho, we were terrified.

 The Israelites had sent twelve spies to scout the land of Canaan. Two spies came to Jericho and entered my house.

Reader: Joshua 2:1-2 Now Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two men from Shittim to be spies. He said, “Go and look over the land and Jericho.” So they set out and came to the house of a woman who was a prostitute. Her name was Rahab. They settled in to spend the night there.

**2**It was reported to the king of Jericho: “Some Israelite men came here tonight to spy on the land.”

Rahab: I hid the spies from the king’s men under the stalks of flax I had laid out on my roof. Before the spies went to sleep for the night, I had a conversation with them.

Reader: Joshua 2:8-14, 17-20 **8**But before the men lay down, Rahab came up to them on the roof. **9**She said to the men, “I know that the Lord has given you the land. Because of you, terror has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are melting in fear before you. **10**Indeed, we have heard that the Lord dried up the waters of the Red Sea in front of you when you came out of Egypt, and we heard what you did to the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan—to Sihon and to Og. We heard that you devoted them to destruction. **11**We heard, and our hearts melted, and no one’s courage could hold up anymore against you, because the Lord your God is God in the heavens above and on the earth below. **12**So now, please swear to me by the Lord that since I have shown kindness to you, you in turn will show kindness to my father’s house. Give me a trustworthy sign **13**that you will preserve the lives of my father and mother and my brothers and sisters and everyone who belongs to them, and that you will spare our lives.”

**14**The men said to her, “If you do not reveal what we are doing, our lives are pledged for your lives, even to the point of death. Then when the Lord gives us the land, we will show mercy and faithfulness to you.”

**17**“When we come into the land, we will be free from this oath that you made us swear **18**unless you tie this bright red cord in the window through which you let us down, and you gather your father and mother, your brothers, and your father’s entire household into your house. **19**If any one of them goes outside the doors of your house, his blood will be on his own head, and we will be free of guilt. Anyone who is with you in the house, his blood will be on our heads if a hand is laid on him. **20**If you reveal what we are doing, we will be free from the oath that you made us swear.”

Rahab: I immediately agreed to everything they said.

 When they left, I quickly tied the scarlet cord in my window.

 Several weeks went by. The citizens of Jericho made sure the city was shut tight for fear of the Israelite army. Judgment was coming. All I could do was trust the spies’ promise. And then the people came! So many people. I had never seen so many people at one time. I learned later that it was approximately two million people!

 I saw the Israelites gathering that first day. Seven priests were carrying trumpets leading the Ark of the Covenant around the city. The entire army of the Israelites followed the Ark.

 But it was eerily silent. There was no noise … except the marching feet. No shouting. No trumpets. Nothing.

 All of Jericho braced for an attack. But nothing happened.

 On the second day, the Israelites marched around the city again. We waited.

 But no attack. Only silence.

 Then the third day. Then the fourth day. Then the fifth day. Then the sixth day.

 Nothing changed. No attack. Only silent marching.

 Then the seventh day dawned!

 The people of Israel marched around Jericho. Then they marched around again. And again.

 Even though the Israelite army remained eerily silent, there was fear and confidence in the air. Fear from the citizens of Jericho. Confidence from the Israelite army.

 When the Israelites marched the seventh time around the city, I could hear Joshua, the commander of the Israelite nation speaking to the army.

Reader: Joshua 6:16-17 **16**Then on the seventh time, the priests blew the ram’s horns, and Joshua said to the people, “Shout, because the Lord has given you the city! **17**The city will be devoted to destruction. The city and everything in it will be devoted to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute will live—she along with all who are with her in the house—because she hid the agents whom we sent.

Then the silence was broken! There was a crescendo of sounds. The priests blew their trumpets. The numerous Israelite army shouted.

 My family trembled. The ground trembled. The walls of the city trembled. And the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. And the citizens of Jericho were put to death.

 But not my house. Inside my house with the scarlet cord everyone was safe.

 As the fighting raged within the city, the two Israelite spies came to my door. They came to bring all of us to safety because of the promise they made to me for hiding them from the king’s men.

Reader: Joshua 6:23-24a, 25 **23**So the young men who had acted as spies went and brought out Rahab, her father, her mother, her brothers, and everyone who belonged to her. They brought out all her family members, and they settled them outside the camp of Israel.

**24**But the city and everything in it they burned with fire. **25**But Joshua spared the lives of Rahab the prostitute and her father’s household and everyone who belonged to her, and she has lived within Israel to this day, because she hid the agents that Joshua sent to spy on Jericho.

Rahab: Judgment came for me that day. But I was safe because of the promise made to me.

 Sisters, judgment is coming for you, too. But you are safe. Not because of anything you’ve done or offered, but because Jesus has made a promise to you. Just like the spies kept their promise to me and kept me safe from the day of judgment brought upon Jericho, so Jesus will keep you safe, too, on the great Day of Judgment that will be brought upon the Earth.

 I neglected to tell you that my means of supporting myself in Jericho was as a prostitute. It’s certainly not something I’m proud to admit. By God’s grace, though, I never had to do that again. By God’s grace, he forgave me of my sin of prostitution. By God’s grace, he did something even greater! He allowed me as a former prostitute to belong to the family of forgiveness.

 I married an Israelite named Salmon. We were blessed with a son named Boaz. Our great grandson was King David. Jesus, the Son of God, is also the son of David. That makes him my Son, too!

 When the Scriptures speak of me, they mention my prostitution, but not in a way to emphasize my shame. Rather, they emphasize God’s grace to me!

Reader: Hebrews 11:31 **31**By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with the unbelievers, because she welcomed the spies in peace. James 2:25 **25**In the same way also, wasn’t Rahab the prostitute shown to be righteous by works when she welcomed the spies and sent them out another way?

Rahab: Sisters, on the Day of Judgment, you will be judged. But like me, through the faith given to you by the Holy Spirit; through the righteousness put on you by Jesus; through the grace shown you by God the Father, you are safe. You are declared “Not guilty!” Not because you’re innocent. But because Jesus has separated you from your sins – adultery and addiction, gossip and grumbling, impatience and ingratitude. Your sins are removed as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

 All through my descendant Jesus.

 The Day of Judgment is coming, but you have nothing to fear.

Your sister in Christ,

Rahab

Song: Peace Came to Earth

* *Adapted from To Tell the Story: Judgment by Rev. Luke Italiano*
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Ruth: Dear Sisters,

My story is one of tragedy that led to triumph. My story is not that unusual. It began with a family from Bethlehem who had left their home because of the famine that plagued the land of Judah. They decided to move to Moab 50 miles south in the hopes of making a better life.

 There is nothing unusual in this. It happens all the time, even now. Perhaps you have moved to this area from somewhere else, hoping for a better life.

 At first, there is tragedy in Moab. The patriarch of the family, Elimelek, dies, leaving his wife, Naomi, a widow. Then there is rejoicing as Elimelek and Naomi’s two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, marry myself and my friend, Orpah. But soon there is tragedy again as our two husbands die, leaving us widowed and childless.

Reader: Ruth 1:1-5 During the days of the judges, a famine occurred in the land. So a man left Bethlehem in Judah to stay awhile in the territory of Moab—he, his wife, and his two sons. **2**The man’s name was Elimelek, his wife’s name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were from the clan of Ephrath from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and remained there.

**3**But Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, died, so she was left with her two sons. **4**They then married Moabite wives. The name of the first was Orpah, and the name of the second was Ruth. They lived there for about ten years. **5**But Naomi’s sons, Mahlon and Kilion, also died. So the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.

Ruth: All three of us widows were grieving. We felt hopeless. There was no one to take care of Naomi. At least, Orpah and I had our families in Moab. Naomi had no one.

 When Naomi decided to make the seven-to-ten-day journey through rugged terrain to return to Bethlehem, I decided to go with her. We wouldn’t have anything in Bethlehem. But, at least, we would have each other.

Reader: Ruth 1:11-18 **11**Then Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Am I going to give birth to any more sons who could become your husbands? **12**Turn back, my daughters. Go! For I am too old to be married to another husband. Suppose I say, ‘I have hope, and I will be married to another husband tonight, and I will even give birth to sons.’ **13**Would you wait for them until they grow up? On the basis of that hope would you give up the chance to marry another husband? No, my daughters. It is much more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has reached out against me.”

**14**They once again wept loudly. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth would not let her go.

**15**Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods. Go back! Follow your sister-in-law.”

**16**But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Because wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you make your home, I will make my home. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. **17**Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely and double it if anything but death separates me from you.”

**18**When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Ruth: As I said, my tragedy is not uncommon. Why would my story end up in the Bible? A tale like mine is a dime a dozen. You hear these stories in war-torn countries, in families displaced by ethnic cleansing, at sea among desperate refugees, or gang-ridden neighborhoods where death is an all too familiar visitor.

 The pain is too uncomfortable to watch. It is too overwhelming. When we are experiencing this pain, it feels like all eyes are on us. But when we see others are experiencing this pain, we often look away or pass by.

 But God would not allow my disaster to pass him by. He did not look away. He was watching the entire way.

 Though nobody could have foretold it, God used our tragedy to plant the seeds of his own Son’s family tree.

 Naomi and I arrived in Bethlehem in early spring as the barley harvest was beginning. I began working in the barley fields to support Naomi and myself. After the harvesters picked the grain, I followed behind “gleaning” or picking the left-over grain. It wasn’t by chance or good luck that I ended up working in the fields of a man named Boaz. In his divine providence, God made sure I began working in Boaz’s fields. Boaz showed great kindness to me, instructing his harvesters to leave extra grain for me to pick.

Reader: Ruth 2:19-20 **19**Then her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today and where did you work? May the man who took notice of you be blessed!”

So she told her mother-in-law in whose field she had worked: “The name of the man in whose field I worked today is Boaz.”

**20**Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed by the Lord, whose faithfulness has not forsaken the living and the dead!”

Naomi also said to her, “This man is related to us. He is even one of our family’s redeemers.”

Ruth: Naomi identified Boaz as “one of our family’s redeemers.” According to Old Testament law, a “redeemer” had the right to purchase the land of a deceased relative. By doing so, he would also receive the widow as his spouse. Boaz desired to purchase the land of my father-in-law, Elimelek. He would then also receive me as his wife.

 But first, there was another relative who had the first right to be our family’s redeemer. He desired the land, but not the wife. So, he allowed Boaz to redeem the land as his own and myself as his wife.

Reader: Ruth 4:1-6, 9-10 Boaz went up to the city gate, and he sat down there. Just then, the redeemer about whom Boaz had spoken was passing by. Boaz said, “Come over here! Sit down, my dear friend!” So he came over and sat down.

**2**Then Boaz chose ten men from the elders of the town, and he said, “Sit down here!” They too sat down.

**3**Then he said to the redeemer, “Naomi, who returned from the territory of Moab, is putting up for sale the piece of land that belongs to our brother Elimelek. **4**On my part, I thought I should call it to your attention so that you may acquire it in the presence of these residents and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you wish to redeem it, redeem it. But if you do not wish to redeem it, declare that to me. I know that there is no one ahead of you in the right to redeem, but I am right after you.”

So the man said, “Yes, I will redeem it.”

**5**Then Boaz said, “On the day that you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, I will acquire from Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the deceased, the means to perpetuate the name of the deceased on his inheritance.”

**6**Then the redeemer said, “I am not able to redeem it for myself, or I would ruin my inheritance. You acquire for yourself my right of redemption, because I am not able to redeem it.”

**9**Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi everything that belonged to Elimelek and everything that belonged to Kilion and Mahlon. **10**Furthermore, Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, I have acquired for myself as a wife, in order to perpetuate the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased shall not be cut off from his brothers and from the city gate of his place. You are witnesses today.”

Ruth: After our marriage, God blessed us with a son. We named him, Obed. Eventually, Obed became the father of Jesse. Jesse became the father of David, who was anointed by God to be the king of Israel.

 Many generations later, the Bible tells us that there was “a virgin pledged in marriage to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (Luke 1:27).

 God took our family tragedy and created a triumph for all the families of the world!

 God took our seemingly dead soil and planted the seeds of the family tree of the Savior.

 No doubt, you have endured tragedies like mine. Take comfort, sisters, God has not forgotten you. He has not allowed your disaster to pass him by. He is watching the entire way. Your grief and suffering are the very soil from which Jesus’ family tree springs to life.

Jesus came into this world to be your Redeemer. The Christ of Christmas was born to redeem us, to buy us back from sin and eternal death. Thirty-three years after Jesus was wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger, he was wrapped in burial cloths and laid in a tomb.

God’s plan of redeeming humanity was completed. Jesus finished the work his Father had planned through Abraham and Sarah, Salmon and Rahab, and Boaz and myself. With his holy, precious blood, Jesus paid the redemptive price to purchase all people from sin, death, Satan and hell. For proof of Christ’s redemptive work, look no further than the strips of burial cloths that Peter found at the tomb on Easter morning.

Despite whatever tragedies you have experienced or are experiencing, Jesus has turned your tragedies into triumph. Through faith in my descendant, Jesus, you are a part of his family. Now when you die, you have the confidence that you will see your Redeemer in heaven.

Reader: Job 19:25-27 **25**As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the end of time he will stand over the dust. **26**Then, even after my skin has been destroyed, nevertheless, in my own flesh I will see God. **27**I myself will see him. My own eyes will see him, and not as a stranger.

Your sister in Christ,

Ruth

Song: My Soul in Stillness Waits

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