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SERMON TITLE: Five Faithful Women
SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:39-49
DATE December 18, 2022 Advent Four
Online service at www.fpcd.org/live

Read Genesis 17:15-16, Hebrews 11:11, Esther 4:13-16, Ruth 1:10-18.

This morning you heard the story of two women whom God used to bring our Savior into the world. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, had a surprising pregnancy herself just a few months before Mary, and as she learned what it meant for her to be part of God's plan, she, then, encouraged Mary. Today we are going to go back a number of years when God initiated the plan of action to ultimately bring us Jesus. We will look across the span of time to a few other women who were also a part of God's plan.

The first story begins with an elderly couple whom God had called with a promise. It was 1900 years before the birth of Christ:

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarah your wife, . . . I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

This seems like an extraordinary plan; fantastic; outrageous really. It was the first but it would not be the only! Sarah had to follow her husband through so many outlandish plans—moving; traveling to a foreign country to survive a famine; being abducted by that country's king; being rescued; then carrying on for years of waiting. After twenty years of waiting, taking matters into her own hands to birth a son through her handmaiden.

If you know the story, you know that did not go well!

But the day came. She finally did have that promised child and he grew up healthy. As it is recorded in the New Testament book of Hebrews, Sarah is a model of faith: (Heb 11:7)

"It was by faith that even Sarah was able to have a child, though she was barren and was too old. She believed that God would keep his promise."

Sarah's son, Isaac, began the ancestral line that a few hundred years later became Israel, which conquered God's Promised Land of Canaan.

Later, during the time of the judges, there was a famine in Israel so a family—father and mother with their two sons—left Bethlehem, of Judah, and moved to the land of Moab to find food. Their sons grew up and married Moabite women. However, tragedy struck. The woman's husband and both her sons died. Imagine losing your only two children and husband. She didn't know what to do, except return to Bethlehem. It was about 1120 B.C.:

Naomi's daughters-in-law said, "We want to go with you to your people." But she replied, "Why should you go on with me? Can I give birth to other sons to be your husbands? No, my daughters, return to your parents' homes . . . They wept together, and Orpah kissed Naomi good-bye. But Ruth clung tightly to Naomi. . . . She replied, "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!" When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more.

Ruth, with her youthful energy, provided for her mother-in-law until a chance meeting brought her an unexpected surprise! She met a successful and kind man who was in line to marry her! God brings these surprises when we least expect them. The genealogy would not be broken, no matter what twists and turns life takes. Ruth was the great grandmother of King David, the line through which Jesus would be born.

Years passed. Israel was exiled. It was a dangerous time of many enemies and few advocates. Although diminished and weak, God still continued to watch over them and maintain faithfulness to them.

In 480 B.C., a difficult threat came against Israel in the capital of Susa, Persia. Living there was a Jewish man named Mordecai who had adopted his young, orphaned cousin, Esther. Through a series of unusual events, she became Queen of Persia. Even while living in the palace, she kept in constant contact with her adoptive father, Mordecai, but no one knew of her Jewish heritage.

Unfortunately, an enemy infiltrated the king's regime which led to an official edict to annihilate the Jews. But God had been stealthily moving people like chess players, unknown to the Jews' enemies:

Mordecai sent this message to his niece, Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Gather all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. No food or drink for three days. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die."

God faithfully brought each of these problems, losses and tragedies to a positive outcome and God's plan carried on across the centuries until that day in which the angel came to both Zechariah in the temple and Mary in her village announcing very good news.

Sarah, Ruth, Esther, Mary, Elizabeth. These women span nearly 1,930 years, as God's plan unfolded little by little. God is a planner!

What are some characteristics of these women that we can all learn from? (Men can learn from women and vice versa!)

Commitment to Family

1. **Sarah** partnered with Abraham when she learned of his faith vision. She did everything in her power to help it come to fruition, even to the point of arranging for a "surrogate birth." Sometimes our "over helpfulness" can work toward our detriment, though, as she teaches us!
2. **Ruth** had her own sorrow and disappointment but she did not want to abandon her widowed mother-in-law. That was the way she survived her own tragedy, by focusing on Naomi's needs rather than her own.
3. **Esther** became the most important woman in Persia, yet she still submitted to and trusted her adoptive father's authority, and through that obedience to her family member, she was able to save her people.
4. **Elizabeth** wanted to support and bolster Mary's call by God. Even though she was older, she wisely put the needs of her younger cousin ahead of her own and mentored her.
5. **Mary** did not see an unexpected pregnancy as ruining her life. She opened her womb to bear the Son of God. God surrounded Jesus by a human mother and father, as well as cousins who knew and cared for them.

Gave up Something

1. **Sarah** gave up her own country to follow Abraham's call. She lived with him in a foreign land, in a tent all her days. She waited from age 60 to 80 to get pregnant, but embraced the gift when it came.
2. **Ruth** left her own family and religion to follow Israel's God and take care of her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi.
3. **Esther** put her life on the line to go before the king.
4. **Elizabeth** gave up her son to his ministry as the forerunner of Christ. She served her younger cousin, Mary's call.
5. **Mary** gave up the norm of engagement, then marriage, then pregnancy; instead humbling herself when appearances were otherwise, because she saw the honor God was giving her to bear his Son.

1. What Hope Came from Their Faith?

2. **Sarah** indeed had a baby, even at 80—which made her laugh! 😊 And because of Sarah's willingness to join her husband's faith journey, Abraham's family did become a great nation just as God promised.
3. **Ruth** received a new husband, Boaz, and had a son, and was the great grandmother to King David, of the line of Judah.

4. **Esther** was invited into the presence of the King and she was able to save her people.
5. **Elizabeth** had the joy of a baby in her old age and mentored the mother of Jesus.
6. **Mary** bore our Lord. Because she said yes, the whole world has been changed forever.

Hebrews tells us: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). This is the most important, most effective witness to God's presence in this world. Do you need hope?

It comes through faith.

Life has many twists and turns. It is not faith that causes or prevents the things that come our way. But faith can make all the difference in bringing hope in the midst of life's ups and downs.

Do you need hope?

These women were not perfect, and they did not see the full outcome of their decisions. But their lifestyles of faith stand for all time. What kind of impact do you want your faith to have? The journey you choose to take affects not just you, but your family and the neighborhood around you.

I ask you to embrace what comes to you with faith. Then you, too, will make all the difference.

AMEN