

The Power of the Promise

Jeremiah 33:14-16 & Luke 21:25-36

The days are surely coming declares the Lord when I will fulfil the good promise I have made.

Good morning and Happy New Year. That our liturgical year begins several weeks before the calendar year gently reminds us that we as Christians are called to be slightly out of step with the world. We march to a different drummer and a different tune. This year we'll explore the Gospel of Luke and once again encounter its timeless stories: The Rich Man and Lazarus; The Prodigal Son; The Good Samaritan. And we'll also hear the wonderfully disturbing question posed on the day of Resurrection: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Another year of gospel revelations await. But today I want to talk about the power of promises, especially those sacred promises God has made to us and the ones we make to each other. So much rides on a promise. When they are kept, they can make us sing like Zechariah, rejoicing over the fulfillment of God's promise made to Israel. A promise kept gives us the sense that in this one particular matter, whatever that matter may be, all is right with the world. A broken promise destroys this understanding. Suddenly we're filled with doubt and questions. Have I been taken advantage of? Were things ever as I believed, or was I merely fooling myself, blind to what everyone else could see?

Promises shape our world, from the vows couples make at weddings, to the declarations Godparents make at baptismal celebrations, to the complex treaties and agreements between nations. We are held together by the promises we make. Maybe that's why we have the old saying: Don't make promises you can't keep.

Yes, there is power in a promise, power to bring life and joy, and, if broken, power to bring sorrow and to destroy.

If you want to ruin your reputation, break a promise. Your name will be mud, as they say. For they also say, "A man's word is his bond." And so it is with God's word, God's promises. The Holy One is held accountable for what has been proclaimed by His prophets.

Surely the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I have made. Jeremiah repeats this sentiment again and again, each time offering God's promise of renewal and restoration. There's the promise of a new covenant, of a righteous branch of David who will reign as king.

We know that promise to have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who came to us in great humility and vulnerability. All the power and divinity of God became flesh, helpless at his birth, needing the love and shelter of mother and father to survive.

Advent reminds us of God's promise made real in a way that still confounds and bewilders and engages. How can God so love the world, the whole world, with all its beauty and ugliness? How can God so love us, who are capable of magnificent compassion and shallow disregard? How can the Creator so love his creation that he gave his only Son to live and die as one of us so that through that son's sacrifice and

resurrection we would have the hope of eternal life? Advent challenge us with such questions as we contemplate the Incarnation and a promise fulfilled. But there is also a promise yet to be fulfilled.

In today's gospel, Jesus describes his Second Coming in frightening and unsettling ways. The seas roar. People faint from fear and terror. The powers of heaven are shaken. "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

Lord only knows what the Second Coming will really be like. Two thousand years have come and gone, giving us plenty of time to devise our numerous theologies and imaginings, some the fruit of great minds, others merely the fevered pronouncements of self-proclaimed prophets. Yet, this unfulfilled promise lies at the heart of our faith. For do we not say that we believe he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end? These are not empty words, drained of all meaning and power by their constant repetition.

And yet. We wait. Humanity and Christianity cast in the roles of Vladimir and Estragon idling by the roadside, waiting for Godot. Or, perhaps, somewhere a rocking cradle is rousing the Divine from 20-plus centuries of stony sleep. The waiting is indeed the hardest part. We start to hear voices, the whispers of skeptics, like those found in 2nd Peter: "Where is the promise of his coming? ... All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." (2nd Peter 3:3-4) Yes, waiting is hard. While the fulfillment can be so sweet.

I experienced this struggle with patience over a promise made not too long ago, though not in matters as profound as the Second Coming. I had a worn, six-volume commentary on the Greek New Testament by Henry Alford, one of the great scholars of the 19th century. But the spines were broken. Pages were falling out. The set was useless. Then I met a retired bookbinder who promised he could repair the set. Great!

I gave him the set and waited, and waited. Weeks went by, then months. Every time I asked about the books, I got an excuse. He was getting married. He was trying to sell his house. He was tending to a dying relative. You would have thought that last reason would evoke some pastoral compassion on my part, but I wanted my books back. My patience waned. Now, I know that somewhere in the psalms it says we should wait on the Lord. But it doesn't say anything about waiting on the bookbinder. Doubt crept in, along with frustration. I was about to give up.

We had started with such hope. I remembered happily giving him the books, glad to have finally found someone who could bring them back to life. Now, months later, I felt I might as well have left them at home on the shelf. Then, one day, he called: "I have your books." I have your books? They were as good as new, the bindings stiff, the loose pages reset, the spines as solid as the day they were made. "How much do I owe you," I asked. He shook his head. "Nothing." I couldn't believe it. The promised had been fulfilled, with an extra blessing.

Everywhere I went I retold the story. Joy and amazement filled my voice. I sang like Zechariah, only my words were: "The dude said he would do it and he did it! And he didn't charge me a thing." He made me a promise and he kept it.

Now, as I said, this is rather mundane when compared to the Second Coming, but some of the same dynamics were at work – a promise made, the waiting, the promise fulfilled. Our Lord has promised to return, and we are called to take him at his word, even as the years roll on with no sign. We do not give

up. In today's gospel Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and the worries of life. Be alert. Pray." In other words, live the life of faith.

And consider not only the power of his promise, but also the promises you have made and will make. Maybe someone is waiting for you to make good on what you have said. Maybe you have forgotten the power of a promise fulfilled. Maybe you have forgotten these words of an old priest who did not believe the promise and whose mouth was shut until all had been revealed and then, and only then, was he filled with the Holy Spirit and able to sing his enduring song: Blessed by the Lord God for he has remembered his holy covenant and the oath he has made.

The days are surely coming, by brothers and sisters. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I have made.

Amen.

The Rev. M. Dion Thompson, 2 December 2018