

PROMISES, PROMISES
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Genesis 9: 8 – 17 (NRSV)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

The possibility of promise has been on our minds during the last several months, even though we may not have identified our concerns as matters of promise. The financial calamity that the nation is facing is about accountability, responsibility, and trust that for an investor such as you and me is, at last, the issue of promise. Indeed, the money that is in our billfold this morning is a “promissory note.” If you have watched your portfolio or pension funds deplete by nearly 30%, as I have, you cannot avoid the feeling that promises are broken. If you are the financial

victim of Bernard Madoff or Robert Allen Stanford, not only have promises been broken, you have been robbed!

We are also thinking about promises that have been made in Iraq and Afghanistan and what the decision to reduce troops in Iraq and expand them in Afghanistan means. People are comparing promises made in the Bush administration with promises made in the Obama campaign.

Promise is an extraordinarily important word in our vocabulary. We make promises when we marry and baptize our children. We sometimes make promises by the deathbed. People make promises when they become scouts or enter the military. We talk about the promise that future generations, and our own children in particular, represent. We even have a butter substitute named “Promise.” That pledge is one of a healthy heart. Artist Tracy Chapman sang a song entitled, “The Promise:”

“If you wait for me then I’ll come for you
 Although I’ve traveled far.
 I always hold a place for you in my heart.
 If you think of me, if you miss me once in awhile
 Then I’ll return to you.
 I’ll return and fill that space in your heart.”¹

¹ Tracy Chapman, “The Promise,” http://www.lyricsfreak.com/t/tracy+chapman/the+promise_20140267. Downloaded 2/28/09.

There is a sense that a promise is a sacred vow, and there is good reason to think so. Both the Old and New Testaments bulge with messages of promise. Donald E. Gowan points out that the theme of promise is a distinctive feature of the Bible, compared with other religious scriptures. Sacred promise has a flow to it that Gowan describes thus:

“God makes promises, their fulfillment is jeopardized in one way or another, partial fulfillments are recorded, and new promises are added to old ones. This places significant demands on believers. Trust is required – that God is able and willing to keep the promise – and patience, for fulfillment will come not now, but later. These are the elements that make up the theme of promise in Scripture.”²

Promise in the Old Testament, beginning with Abraham, was tied to land, a great nation, and a source of blessing for all the nations. Ever tied to the future Israel’s promise fades and the terms of hope become increasingly tied to the faithfulness of the people. In the prophetic writings of the Old Testament the viability of God’s promise would “require a radical transformation of human nature and society.”³ Promise is irrevocably anchored to the demands of faith, patience, and the trust of God’s people.

² Donald E. Gowan, “Promise,” *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, general editor Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), Vol. IV, p. 617.

³ *Ibid.* 118.

In the New Testament promise shifts away from land and nationality to the new relationship God has established in Jesus Christ. Gowan terms this a “spiritualized” promise. Like all things spiritual it is necessarily vague, but is joined with such values as the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise shifts from the geography of Palestine to the community of faith and the new life in the risen Christ and the affirmation that Christ would return with victory over evil.⁴ Like the promises of the Old Testament, there are yet promises of peace on earth

Some of us are still waiting for peace on earth; victory over evil; freedom for the captives; healing for the wounded; food for the hungry and water for the thirsty. Others of us would be happy if people would be true to their word, deliver the goods and services they promise, speak truth simple and plain. We would relish the reality that our children would grow up to fulfill the promise of their minds and the skills of their hands.

Regardless of the level of our expectation, I think that most of us in the Christian tradition wonder about the promises of God. We wonder about the possibility of God and the promises we can

⁴ Gowan, 619.

rely on. People who are not Christians wonder what it is about God that we dare trust. Given the ever-present reality of evil in the world and the calamity that strikes every home, what is it that we hope for from God? You hear the lament when a young child dies, “Why did God let this happen?” “Where was God when that drunk smashed into the car and killed my spouse?”

I have learned that God’s promise has little to do with the cause and effect of human beings, the actions that we take, and the disasters that we perpetrate on others and ourselves. I long ago abandoned the idea that God is the deciding factor in tornadoes, hurricanes, mudslides, floods, and all other natural disasters. What I do believe is that all that passes for life passes in the presence of God. All that we are and all that we do occur in the substance of the sacred. The joys and shadows of our daily activities unfold in God’s light. The promise that I rely on is that through it all God is with us. Whether I am weeping or dancing God shares the sorrow and the joy. God is there to comfort and to figuratively wipe away the tears. Let me offer an example.

When we go horseback riding I do everything in my power to make sure that the tack is properly cinched and secure. But there

is a point when my loved one mounts the horse and takes the reins. I might ride beside them. I might call out suggestions or encouragement. But ultimately I cannot ride for them, or stop the horse from taking off. I cannot stop someone from falling off or being thrown. But if that happens you can bet that I will rush to their side to comfort them physically and emotionally. And if they maintain their seat and keep control of the horse you can bet that I will offer praises and congratulations, even if they are crying from fear. If they are thrown and not hurt I will insist they get back in the saddle and re-establish control of the horse.

That is similar to my experience with God. God has certainly not spared me from myself or protected me from my enemies. As a minister I am the subject of petty gossip and vicious rumors, and parishioners who transfer to me resentment for painful behaviors of ministers, or priests, or parental figures in their past. I sometimes feel like the United Methodist minister who was appointed to a small rural congregation. Not only was the pastor young, but also a woman. A female minister had never served the church. There were a number of members, especially men, who

were not only unenthusiastic, but also downright upset by the appointment.

Two men in particular were talking about the issue on the Sunday morning of her inaugural sermon. “This will be the test,” they agreed. But when the service was over they left the church confounded. It was the best sermon they had ever heard in their lives. The preacher was compelling, offering a sermon with clear evidence of solid Biblical scholarship graced with humor and profound inspiration.

“Yeah,” said one of the men, but I’ll bet she’s a bust in terms of pastoral care.” Within two weeks the young woman’s compassion and adroit care was spoken of throughout the community, not only in her own congregation but in others as well. She offered a compelling wedding ceremony that involved two families that historically had detested one another. A memorial service for a child displayed deep empathy and solid Christian faith.

The two men painfully admitted that perhaps they had rushed to judgment. It had been their practice to take the minister fishing with them on Wednesday afternoons. They decided that they would have to invite her along. They had been on the lake for several

hours and nearly out of bait. One said, “Well, I guess we need to motor in to the bait house and get some more worms.”

“Oh, don’t bother,” said the minister. “I’ll get them.” And with that she stepped out of the boat and walked across the water to get the bait.

One of the men turned to the other and said, “Wouldn’t you know it – they sent us a preacher that can’t swim.”

Like every one of you I have my lot of physical pain, broken dishwashers, and flat tires. My electricity goes out when the ice storm hits my neighborhood. My children make me worry sometimes and cause me to lose sleep.

Not for a moment do I believe that any of this is the cause of God. I do believe that God is ever present to comfort and guide me. Much of that faith rests in the promise that good will overcome evil; that love is stronger than hatred; that peace is the way to peace, not pre-emptive violence; that virtue is the hope for every community; that kindness is stronger than greed; and that together we can walk through deep valleys of fear and death. Even in death I believe in these promises and it is my sincere hope that they will prosper long after I have passed away. I will trust my

friends and family to carry my memory past the grave. But more importantly I put my faith in the God who has carried me thus far and will carry me beyond imagination.

In his poem, “The Assumption,” John O’Donohue wrote of promises that I trust:

Perhaps time is the keeper of distance and loss,
Knowing that we are but able for a little at a time.
And the innocence of fragments is wise with us,
Keeps us from order that is not native to our dust.

Yet, without warning, a life can suddenly chance
On its hidden rhythm, find a flow it never knew.
Where the heart was blind, subtle worlds rise into view;
Where the mind was forced, crippled thought
begins to dance.

As if this day found for her everything she lost.
Her breath infused with harvest she never expected
From the unlived lives she had only touched in dream;
Her mind rests; memory glows in a stairs of twilight.

Her hair kisses the breeze. Her eyes know it is time.
She looks as young as the evening the raven came.⁵

God’s promise is God’s enduring love that restores the limits of time and body. That is the promise that I trust.

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⁵ John O’Donohue, “The Assumption,” *Conamara Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 49.