

"Promises, Promises"
Jeremiah 33:14-16

December 2, 2018

1st Sunday of Advent

For those of you who are homeowners (a fraternity which my wife and I had the pleasure of joining several years back), what happened after you picked out the house of your dreams? You had to find a way to finance this large purchase. Suppose the realtor told you that you owed \$200,000 and you said to him/her, "I don't have that much money. However, trust me, I promise to pay a little every month for the house until it's all paid off." Or, suppose you saw a brand-new shiny car in a dealer's lot and they demanded \$25,000 for it, but you told them, "I don't have that kind of money. But I promise to give you a little bit of money every month until I pay for it. Cross my heart and hope to die."

Those of you who know the real estate or automobile industries and played the game know that you wouldn't get very far in obtaining either a house or a brand-new car that way. Promises aren't enough. Either you have to come up with the cash in full at the time of purchase or you have to sign a legally binding agreement (called a loan) which requires you, under threat of punishment for failure to comply, to pay monthly installments of the precise amount. If you try to operate on the basis of merely a promise, you would be laughed out of the car dealership or the real estate office. Promises alone (without a detailed credit rating, character references, and the handing over of your firstborn male child) are not trusted or taken seriously in such a high-stakes financial deal as this.

Why not? The answer is simple. Sinful human beings often break promises all the time. We don't deal truthfully with each other, either by deliberate deception or serious circumstances. Children promised to clean their room and do their homework, but then they don't. Young adults stand before this altar at their confirmation Day and promise "to hear the Word of God and receive the Lords Supper faithfully" and "to live according to the Word of God," but, after the ceremony is over, so is there from and we don't see them again. Married people fail to honor their promises in marriage, especially the part which says "till death us do part" and they get divorced.

Our sinful nature, in addition to causing us to break promises, also causes us to not take responsible for broken promises. We may try to change the terms of the promise into something other than what it was so that we can say we didn't break the promise We may lie and say we never promised this or that. We may blame others for broken promises by saying, "I didn't promise that. He did."

As a result of all this, we become very cynical and jaded whenever anyone promises us anything. When someone offers us something truly wonderful, we may respond by saying, "Promises, Promises!" We become suspicious whenever anyone promises to do something for us. We may even out right disbelieve people when they promise us something. To protect ourselves, we may try one of two things with promise makers. First, we may demand everything immediately so that we don't have to wait for promise to come true. Secondly, we want an ironclad legal agreement to guarantee whatever is promise to us.

This all explains why people put Christmas decorations on their houses the night of Thanksgiving and why Advent services are not well attended. What? You don't get it? Christianity is all about promises. The Lord is a God of promises. He does not usually accomplish His will through direct and immediate action. He often deals in the realm of promises.

Advent specifically is not very popular for the same reason. It is a season of promises and we don't like that. We want to skip right ahead to Christmas and begin setting up decorations on the Labor Day weekend and singing Christmas carols right after the last notes of "I Know That My Redeemer Lives" have been played on Easter Sunday morning. Christmas is about fulfillment of promises. We like that. However, if all we care about is fulfillment of promises, it may make it more difficult for our everyday life outside the holiday season.

Many of God's promises are long-term in nature, fulfillment, and application. Our sinful nature has problems with long waiting. For example, immediately after Adam and Eve sinned God promised the coming of a Savior to crush the serpent's head. Eve, thinking this was a short-term promise which would happen immediately, assumed that she had given birth to the Savior when Cain was born. She said, "I have gotten the man, the Lord." The people of God waited thousands of years on that promise.

When Jesus grew up and went to the cross to offer His life as the perfect and complete sacrifice for the sin of all humanity who ever lived, He said, "It is finished!" Forgiveness had been won in its entirety. When Jesus emerged from the tomb alive three days later, He promised, "because I live, you will live also." Eternal life had been obtained for humanity. The people of God had waited thousands of years for that promise.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised His disciples that He would be with them always and that, one day, He would return visibly to bring them home. He has promised His followers transformed and perfect bodies, a new heaven and a new earth, and joy and peace that will last forever. The people of God are still waiting for that promise after thousands of years.

When we hear these wonderful promises from God and see what is going on in our lives around us, we may just roll our eyes and say to ourselves, "Promises, Promises!" Or, we might scoff at such unrealistic promises, disbelieve them, or demand immediate proof that they are ever going to happen. As life goes on, they we become more apathetic and simply not care because the promises are so unrealistic. Again, that's why Advent is less popular than Christmas. It's all about promises when we really want results.

This is where we have such great news. Our perfect and holy God is much different than we poor, miserable sinners when it comes to promises. God, not only makes promises, but God always fulfills promises perfectly, completely and perpetually.

In our text today for the 1st Sunday of Advent is from the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet is speaking to the people of Judah and makes a wonderful promise. In the future, the Lord will come and fulfill the promise he made to Israel and Judah. Even though Judah, the southern half of Israel, had been taken off into exile by Babylon,

nevertheless, the Lord would come, keep His promise and restore the nation so that “Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely.” After a period of time, that’s exactly what the Lord did. He brought back Judah from exile. He saved them. Jerusalem dwelt securely.

In addition to this wonderful promise, the Lord promised something even more wonderful: the Messiah. Out of the deadness of sin and death, a righteous Branch would spring up from the family of David. He would execute justice and righteousness in the land. His title would be, “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Time passed (around 500 years). People waited. The promise continued on. And, then, God fulfilled His promise. He sent forth His Son, Jesus Christ, to be born of a virgin in Bethlehem. Jesus “executed justice” by fulfilling the Law of God in our place and for our benefit. He brought forth righteousness (that is, holiness) by gaining forgiveness for all of our sin in His death on the cross. He gained eternal life for all who would believe by coming out of His tomb three days later, alive and well.

Part of our commemoration of Advent is to remind us of this great promise of God which He fulfilled at Christmas. We joyfully celebrate the keeping of God’s promise in the birth of the Christ child. But that’s not the only reason for Advent. We have some waiting to do on our own. God has made a wonderful promise to us, as well. He promises to us forgiveness, new life, and eternal life with Him in heaven.

We rejoice in Advent because, once again, God delivers on His promise. He has sent Jesus to us to give us forgiveness, new life, and salvation. Jesus speaks to us in His Word which, as Isaiah the prophet says, will not come back to him empty. It will accomplish what he intends it to purpose. When His word of forgiveness is spoken in the Word of God, we have forgiveness just as God promised.

God attaches His promise to some earthly elements so that He might deliver them to us. His promise attached to water in Holy Baptism gives us cleansing from sin and begins a new life within us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. His promise attached to bread and wine in Holy Communion brings us His very body and His very blood to nurture and strengthen our faith as we walk the way of Jesus. Now, we, like Israel, are saved. We, like Jerusalem, dwell securely.

Having kept His promise of sending a Savior to gain for us forgiveness, life, and salvation and having kept His promise of delivering forgiveness, life, and salvation to us in His Holy Word and in the Sacraments, we turn to His promise of sending Jesus back to gather His faithful people and bring them to unspeakable joy, eternal peace, and divine love with Him in Heaven. God most certainly will fulfill that promise.

So, we find ourselves in the same position as the people of God in the past, especially in our text. God has made a promise. God has kept a promise. God now offers a promise. Even though we often break promises and we often are disappointed by those who make and break promises to us, God will never break His promise to us. God will never disappoint us.

This is why we need a season like Advent – to reign in our demand for immediate satisfaction, to remind ourselves that we are a “waiting people” as God’s people always have been, and to renew our faith in the sureness of God’s promises.

How do we do that? We live, as the Scriptures tell us, by faith, not by sight. The feedback which our senses give us do not always accurately reflect reality. We do not measure reality simply by what we see, but by what God has promised in His Word.

Therefore, we cling – not simply know or believe but cling - to God's promises in the present, based on God's faithfulness to His promises in the past. We find great comfort, hope, and peace in hearing the Word of God in daily devotions individually (especially during the Advent season) and in Divine Service together. We receive God's many blessings to us by living in our Baptism as a child of God and by receiving His body and His blood with the bread and the wine in Holy Communion.

We continue to live in the present with an eye to the future. We know and remember God's promises from His Holy Word about the future and draw great strength and confidence from them for we know that He will keep them. Like a sea captain on a ship who remains on the deck of the ship while looking through the spyglass at his final destination, we remain fully invested in the here and now while we look through the Word of God to our final destination.

Don't forget about Advent. Don't ignore it or skip past it to get to Christmas. Spend some time, especially in our Wednesday evening services, to contemplate God's promises, the link between promise and fulfillment and the glorious fact that God always keeps his promises perfectly. Build your joy this year, not on the fleeting and temporary happiness of a winter holiday season, but on the great and eternal promises of God which He has kept, which He keeps now, and which He will always keep. Amen