

“Promise Fulfilled”

Genesis 3:15

December 24,2013

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

Promises are pledges and commitments to do something. We make promises all the time. Especially do we make promises at Christmas. Kids promise to be good in order to get presents. A son or daughter promises to be home for Christmas. A parent promises his child to get the special toy or device that everyone wants for Christmas. Promises offer hope.

But hope can be shattered because we often break promises as easily as we make them. Kids' promises to be good last until the day after Thanksgiving before the bad behavior shows up again. At the last minute, a son or daughter has to work on or near Christmas and can't come home. The store is out of the premiere present – the Cabbage Patch Kid or the Tickle Me, Elmo – and the parents are not able to buy the gift they promised. Broken promises make us feel sad, disappointed, maybe even betrayed.

When a promise is not kept or is delayed, we begin to wonder. Maybe the promiser couldn't keep the promise. Maybe the promiser changed his mind about keeping the promise. Maybe, after a long period of waiting, the promise is just going to fade away.

Promises are an important part of the Christmas salvation story. When Adam and Eve rebelled against the Lord and His will, the Lord could have done one of two things. In His holy wrath and righteous judgment, He could have just wiped them out. In that case, as descendants of Adam and Eve, we would not be here, contemplating that this night.

Or, God could do something about the problem of sin. So, the Lord banished them from Eden with the judgment of death for their sin. However, out of His innate love for them and all who would come after them, infected with sin and death (including us), He made them a promise. The devil, speaking through the serpent, had led Adam and Eve to sin and death. God promised that one born of woman would come who would crush the serpent's head while the serpent would bruise this Savior's heel.

Adam and Eve believed this promise and expected it to be fulfilled immediately. When Eve gave birth to her first born son, she said, "I have gotten a man, the Lord." She was certain that this was the one; that now the devil would be defeated; that they would be restored to God's presence; and that they would have life forever.

But Eve was mistaken. God's promise was not fulfilled in Cain. In fact, the promise was not fulfilled immediately. Time passed. Adam and Eve died and returned to the dust without seeing the fulfillment of the promise. Years passed. Decades passed. Centuries passed. Millenia passed. Still, there was no fulfillment.

The promise was repeated again and again from father to son throughout the generations. The promise was expanded and clarified by the prophets. This Serpent Stomper would be born, not from a rich matron, but, according to the prophet, of a young virgin peasant girl. He would be born, not in a world class city like Rome or the Jewish capitol of Jerusalem, but the prophet said in a tiny, backwoods village called Bethlehem. The Savior would be no ordinary individual. The prophets said he would be "Mighty God, "God with us". All of these were wonderful messages that provided a clearer understanding of the promise. However, that's all the people had – a promise. There was no fulfillment.

I'm sure there was a great temptation to abandon the promise. Maybe God couldn't keep the promise. Maybe God changed His mind about the promise. Maybe God has forgotten the promise and, after a long long time, will simply fade away.

But we are here tonight as testimony against this. We are here tonight at the precise time, according to tradition, when God began to keep the promise He had made millenia before to Adam and Eve. On this night and at this hour, the Serpent Stomper, God with us, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace was born and was laid in a manger. He was born of a young virgin named Mary just as promised. He was born in Bethlehem, just as promised.

But this was just the beginning. That old serpent, Satan, would not be mashed in a manger by a baby. He would be crushed on a cross by a man. The Baby of Bethlehem would become known

more for where he grew up, rather than where He had been born. He would be the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

His transition from the lovely nativity scene which we treasure especially on this night to a gruesome and bloody scene on a cross on a day as dark as night would seem to be pointless and tragic if it were not for one more promise made about this Savior. It's not a promise about His coming, His identity, or the circumstances of His birth, but a promise about His mission here on earth. His mission was not to be the adorable star of a winter festival, a teacher of morals, a worker of miracles or a martyr for a lost cause. Isaiah, the prophet, who prophesied about the virgin birth and the Prince of Peace, made sense of this suffering and promised this:

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6)

Jesus came to crush the serpent – Satan's – head. And He did it by taking the transgressions and iniquities of Adam and Eve, of all who have lived since them, of us and allowed Himself to be wounded and crushed in our place so that they may no longer be held against us. He who allowed Himself to be born in poor and humble conditions allowed Himself to die in gruesome and horrific conditions so that we might not die eternally. He who gave Himself over to a painful death on the cross came to life again three days later and walked out of a tomb so that we might walk out of our graves and live forever.

We rejoice and celebrate tonight. We hear the same old Christmas story with great joy. We sing the old Christmas hymns and carols as loud as we can and for as long as we can. After centuries and millennia, God has kept His promise, not only to Adam and Eve, but to each of us as well. Satan's power has been crushed. We have been declared not guilty of our sin and right before God. We have been liberated from death and given everlasting life.

But the story isn't over yet. We are people living under a promise, too. Our Savior who was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger; who grew to manhood and was laid on a cross; who died

and who rose from death to life again has promised to return and bring us home to be with Him in the joy and peace of heaven forever.

We are like the people of the Old Testament. The promise was expanded and clarified several times by Jesus before He ascended into heaven. Time has passed – decades, centuries, even millennia – and all we have is a promise. We have side promises for our benefit. Until He comes, Jesus promises that water will wash away sin in baptism; that the Word of God can do more than inform, but can convert, justify, encourage and empower; that bread and wine can hold the body and blood of Jesus in order to bring us forgiveness and to nurture our faith.

It might be easy to be tempted to doubt this promise of Jesus' return as much as the people of the Old Testament were tempted to doubt the promise of Jesus' coming. Maybe Jesus can't come again. Maybe Jesus has changed His mind about coming again. Maybe Jesus has forgotten to come again.

Don't fall for any of that. Our God is a God who makes promises and keeps promises always and without fail. The God who sent His Son in human flesh this night; who gave that Son over to die in order to take our sin away; who raised that Son from the dead in order to guarantee our eternal life will keep His promise and send His Son again to bring us home. The joy and celebration we experience tonight as we remember Jesus' first coming will pale in comparison with our rejoicing and celebrating at His second coming.

May the promise God has fulfilled tonight give you joy once again as you celebrate the birth of Jesus. May the promises Jesus has left us in Word and Sacrament strengthen your faith as you live your new life in Him. May the promise of His return in glory give you hope and fill you with great anticipation as we wait for God once again to keep His promise. Amen.