

Promises, Promises

Jeremiah 30: 12-22

[Lent 2, Augsburg College Chapel, 9 March 2023]

Several years ago I joined with members of my South Minneapolis church in a 365 day read through the Bible initiative. We started on Ash Wednesday and finished the entire Bible – old and new testaments – by mid-February the next year. Despite all my years of theological training, I had never read the Bible through cover-to-cover, and I found the discipline and experience most meaningful.

My early observations, in the first couple of weeks through the book of Genesis and just into Exodus, were just how full these early pages of the Hebrew Bible are with promises, promises – and more promises. We've got promises between God and Adam and Eve, and then with Noah and Abram/Abraham and Sarah, with Isaac and Jacob/Israel and Joseph. We've got promises between these various characters and the myriad other good folks named in Genesis. And these are not only promises made and kept. But these are promises made and then broken, then made again, with perhaps a few acts of deceit thrown in to make things interesting, and then made again. You get the idea. This is a complex and complicated and messy set of relationships, depicted in all their mundane and ordinary details.

I think there was, in my experience of reading about these early days of God's engagement with God's people, an incredibly powerful lesson for our Lenten journeys – a lesson we 21st century faithful tend to overlook in our often jaded and cynical perspectives on life in the world. All over the book of Genesis, we have the story of God in conversation with God's people. God is there and here and there, paying attention, watching over, talking with the various characters, personally engaging in the business of promise-making and keeping. God is here and there and here – here, in our midst, talking with us, making and keeping promises, paying attention when we succeed and fail, when we get it and don't, when we prosper and suffer, when we are in need and self-sufficient. What do you think of that possibility, my fellow faithful? Are you talking back, paying attention, making and keeping your promises?

Our assigned scripture for this morning comes from one of my favorite Old Testament books, the prophet Jeremiah. It is a later tale in the saga of God's chosen people, set against the background of the Babylonian exile, when the temple and city of Jerusalem have been destroyed, the Israelites have been exiled to Babylon, and to be quite honest, this whole promise-making and keeping dynamic is being tested. Our passage articulates this tension pretty clearly. On the one hand, the Lord first proclaims, this is not looking good for you. "Your hurt is incurable, your wound is grievous. There is no one to uphold your cause...All your lovers have forgotten you...your guilt is great...I have done these things to you." Ouch, we might say.

But then, on the turn of a phrase, redemption is at hand. Despite all of this sin and sadness and captivity, you are still my people and I will restore health to you. “I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings...the city shall be rebuilt...Out of them shall come thanksgiving...I will make them many and honored.” And then these remarkable words, “And you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

Words that are emblazoned on the hearts and minds of all God’s faithful. *You are my people and I am your God.* The abiding promise of our awesome God.

So, how are we to understand this God, our God, who stays with us, no matter what? How do we make sense of this God who speaks with us in our 21st century lives? I think part of the challenge for those of us who read these Old Testament stories from a Christian perspective is that the filter of the cross and resurrection sometimes leads us to forget that the relationship between God and God’s people is not completed on Good Friday and Easter, rather it is renewed and redeemed so that we can return freed to listen to God, to the promises made and kept in the midst of all the messiness, to the work we called to do on behalf of God’s people and world.

To this end, returning to the experience of the Israelites and their ongoing engagement with God offers us helpful glimpses into what our God expects when promises are made and kept (or made and broken and made again...) And in those glimpses, we also have a roadmap for the ways we might engage each other in this community and in the neighborhood.

God’s promises are, first of all, always marked by generosity of spirit and means. God doesn’t hold back for God’s people. From the wonders of all creation to the lush garden of Eden to the seeds of renewed life on the Ark to the abiding protection of God’s people living in alien lands, God does not leave God’s people comfortless or without what they need to survive and prosper. In our promises to each other, how are we being generous with each other, sharing all that we have so that we might prosper together?

Second, God’s promises are characterized by a bias toward reconciliation and forgiveness. Think about Adam and Eve – there were consequences for their breaking the promise in Eden, but God never abandons them. How about Abram – he laughed at God when promised offspring, but God keeps his promises nonetheless. And then there’s Jacob, who steals his brother’s birthright and blessing, only to become the progenitor of all of Israel. Are we the forgiving kind? Do we leave our sins at the altar and live as those reconciled to each other, no matter what?

Finally, God’s promises are rooted in hope and in the patience that hope requires in a world full of evidence that runs counter to God’s intentions for God’s people. This is

one of the most remarkable things I have found in my daily Bible readings from the Pentateuch. God doesn't give up on us. God didn't give up on the chosen people in the wilderness or in exile. God doesn't give up on humanity before the flood. God doesn't give up on Abram and Sarai, or Isaac, or Jacob. But in order to understand such a powerful message of hope in the Lord, we also must embrace the patience that doesn't seek immediate gratification, that doesn't allow the ways of the world to define a path forward, that enables us to let God's will emerge in God's time. Do we have the long view of God's reign breaking in? Do we have the patience to abide in our promises to each other, even when it seems that God's will is not being done?

Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen reminds us in his *Bread for the Journey* that:

Patience is a hard discipline. It is not just waiting until something happens over which we have no control: the arrival of a bus...the resolution of a conflict. Patience is not a waiting passivity...Patience asks us to live the moment to the fullest, to be completely present to the moment...to be where we are. When we are impatient we try to get away from where we are. We behave as if the real thing will happen tomorrow, later, and somewhere else. Let's be patient and trust that the treasure we look for is hidden in the ground on which we stand.

Promises, promises. Lord, I believe – help my unbelief, we pray this Lenten season. Everyday on this campus, in this neighborhood, in the world, we make and keep promises to each other, we break promises and make them again, we seek to be God's people and do God's work in this place. May we find in the stories of God's people through the ages the lessons of generosity, reconciliation, hope and patience – lessons of our God who is here, speaking with us, staying with us, paying attention to us, keeping this remarkable promise: *You are my people and I am your God*. Thanks be to God. Amen.