

“Promises, Promises”
Genesis 17:1-14; Romans 4:13-25;
Luke 2:21-38

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As I was preparing this sermon I kept thinking of the 1960's musical of that name. It is considered a Christmas story although Jesus, Bethlehem, and the manger are never mentioned. It is a secular Christmas story. An oxymoron if you will. The musical is based on a movie with Jack Lemmon called “The Apartment.”

The song goes:

*Promises, promises
I'm all through with promises, promises now
I don't know how I got the nerve to walk out
If I shout, remember I feel free
Now I can look at myself and be proud
I'm laughing out loud*

*Oh, promises, promises
This is where those promises, promises end
I don't pretend that what was wrong can be right
Every night I sleep now, no more lies
Things that I promised myself fell apart
But I found my heart*

*Oh, promises, their kind of promises, can just destroy a life
Oh, promises, those kind of promises, take all the joy from life.*

The story is about broken promises. It does have a happy ending when Fran, the girl in the story, breaks out of the broken promise cycle and promises herself happiness, then goes for it.

I'd like to talk about promises from God. Promises anticipated and promises fulfilled.

God made promises throughout the Old Testament. He promised Adam and Eve a Savior who would bring judgment on the serpent, Satan. Then He made them clothes from animal skins. He promised Noah that he would never flood the world. And he set his rainbow in the sky as a mark of His covenant. He promised Moses and the Israelites deliverance from Egypt. He gave them manna in the wilderness and a new home. He promised David a kingdom that would last forever. He gave David many blessings and gifts including the gift of music. He promised Abraham that his descendants would outnumber the grains of sands or the stars in the sky. He also promised him that one of his descendants would be the one who would conquer all enemies. He had Abraham circumcise all male children as a sign that His people were different, special.

God made these promises but he never sets a timeframe or explains the circumstances in which the promise is to be fulfilled. Moses wandered the desert for 40 years and David thought he would live forever.

Instead God creates anticipation. A waiting. An undercurrent of excitement.

Sometimes the anticipation of a promise is more exciting than the fulfillment. The anticipation is filled with the planning and preparing and the busyness of waiting.

We've all experienced it planning a party or preparing for guests. The cleaning and the cooking and the making of gifts. The anticipation, the excitement, the joy that comes along with the work. The party day finally arrives and everything happens very quickly. Guests arrive, gifts are exchanged, and food is eaten.

Then it's over. The fulfillment was wonderful but short lived. All that time spent anticipating, and it's over is just a few hours.

I think that is one reason we make a big deal out of Christmas every year. We go through Advent with anticipation and excitement. We treat every Christmas as if it is the very first one. We put our crèches out with empty mangers waiting for the Christ child to be born once again on Christmas Eve. We spend weeks singing Christmas songs, hearing stories, watching movies or plays, decorating for the event, cleaning, cooking, PREPARING.

Then comes Christmas Eve. The Babe is born. We have our party. We exchange gifts, have a special Christmas dinner, sing Silent Night while holding candles and we wish everyone we meet a Merry Christmas a good cheer. We feel the joy and excitement of a promise fulfilled.

Then it's over.

Did anyone feel the same anticipation about coming to church today as they did on Christmas Eve? Well, I did, but I think it was fear.

There is a kind of let down after an event. There's a slight vacuum afterwards. A feeling of anti-climax during which you may think, "What's next?"

We live for those moments of joy and excitement. It's why we start over again the next year. We work to recapture that excitement of a promise fulfilled. It's why we start Advent with joy and anticipation.

I don't mean to diminish the value of a promise fulfilled. Not at all. For it is the fulfillment of promises that gives us hope and joy in the anticipation of the next promise. After all if, after all the planning and preparing we cancelled Christmas this year, would you feel as excited next year? Would there be a fear or nervousness that it would be cancelled also? The anticipation would be tempered with caution.

Simeon had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. It does not tell when he promised. It could have been days or years or decades. But he anticipated it with joy. He could have visited the temple many times hoping to see the promised one. He may not have known that it was a baby he was looking for. He just knew that he had been promised.

Today is the eighth day since Christmas. Today is the day we would circumcise the baby from the manger and name him. All Jewish baby boys are circumcised eight days after birth as a renewal of the promise God made to Abraham. The Bris or Circumcision ceremony is performed on the eighth day even if it falls on a Sabbath.

There are lots of theories as to why God chose the eighth day for this particular ceremony but the most logical is that the eighth day was chosen to give the new born baby's immune system time to develop. After all, in earlier times a flint stone knife was used, probably the same one that slaughtered the sheep for dinner.

Today the ceremony is normally performed in a synagogue by a rabbi who is trained in circumcision, a Mohel. Friends of the family, usually a couple without children, act as Kvatter. They carry the baby from the mother at the doorway to the father, who in turn hands the baby to the Mohel positioned at the center front of the room. The circumcision is performed and the baby is named. All the traditional prayers are said including the prayer for the Messiah to come soon. The ritual sacrifice of doves and pigeons has been abandoned but a celebratory meal is served to all who attend.

Jesus had his brit and was circumcised and named. Then his parents went to the synagogue to offer the obligatory sacrifice.

Luke does not say whether the two events happened on the same day and it is not critical to the story. It is mentioned simply to confirm that Jesus was fully human.

Simeon was waiting for the promise to be fulfilled, but not until that day did he know he would be seeing a babe in arms fresh from his bris.

What would he have felt afterwards? He had looked forward to seeing a savior, a king, and he had seen a small babe in arms. He had delivered his message to Mary. The prophecy of salvation and trials he would endure. How do you go back to a normal life after all that time as a vessel of the Lord? Won't it seem mundane?

It is the same thing we face today. After the excitement and the anticipation of Advent we have come to the aftermath of the fulfillment of the promise. How do we go back to our normal lives?

The truth is we don't.

Luke does not tell us what Simeon did, but another prophet present at the synagogue that day went on to proclaim to all she met the miracle of the Messiah's birth.

We too should proclaim the Miracle of Christmas.

After the fulfillment of the promise, instead of a letdown we should anticipate the next promise. We should greet each day with the anticipation and excitement of a promise about to be fulfilled. The promise of hope, service, salvation. Each day we should live these promises and praise God for the fulfillment of these promises.

Each day Christ is born in us as the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham. The Messiah is here with us. The promises of God are never broken but are anticipated with joy and excitement and are always fulfilled. The promises of God never end. Anticipate today's fulfillment. Look for it and praise God when you witness that fulfillment.