

"Standing on the Promises"
Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
Lectionary Year C
November 29, 2009
Texts: Psalm 25:1-10; Jeremiah 33:14-16;
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36
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There are a lot of things I don't know about, but I know at least one thing about promises: *They are supposed to be kept.* As a kid, I remember being particularly upset when promises made to me by my parents weren't kept. My children were the same way when they were younger, and as a parent I learned that they possessed the amazing ability to interpret certain remarks I made so as to take their meaning far beyond what I had intended. Therefore when I said, "Maybe so," in response to some request they made, in their minds I actually was stating, "I promise." For them, my "Maybe so," really meant, "I solemnly swear by all that is holy that I will do everything in my power to make what you want to do come true for you." So seeing how my children handled what I said makes me suspect that my parents may have been better about keeping promises than I had given them credit before I became a parent myself.

All of us seem to know that promises are made to be kept. A promise is something that you can stand *by* if you are the one doing the promising and you can stand *on* if you are the recipient of the promise.

Good people, honest people, people with integrity keep promises. *So it is with God.* This is the First Sunday of Advent. In this season of the Christian year we prepare to celebrate the incarnation, God becoming human. One of the ways we can prepare to celebrate that event is by looking at the promises God has made. God keeps his promises, and the Christmas story is one example of the fulfillment of a promise God has made.

The lectionary for today presents us with four passages of scripture, all of which I think have something to say about what God has promised to us. I would like to suggest that these biblical texts seem to function somewhat like the statements that appear on the board in the game show *Jeopardy*. Picture, if you will, a column on the *Jeopardy* board. The category is "promises," and the information in these passages provides us with the answers to certain questions.

The first answer in the column is Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36. What is the question these passages answer? I think it is the question, "What has been promised to *us*?" and it seems to me that the passages of scripture assure us of this promise: that *Christ indeed is Immanuel, God with us.* From the perspective of the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah tells us that Jesus, the righteous Branch of David, will come to execute justice and righteousness. Jesus himself, the fulfillment of that promise, tells us not only that he will

come again with power and great glory, he also promises to us that his words will not pass away, though everything else may.

I believe that all of the language in these two passages points to one basic promise, that *God in Christ is with us and for us*. Jesus has come for us, will come for us, and continues to be available to us between his two comings in the abiding presence of his words. As you already have heard me say once recently, we stand between these two comings, and we must not separate them; they are both a part of the redemptive plan of God. It is the Son of Man who *will* come with power and great glory who also *has* come as a tiny baby in a manger and vice versa. The justice and the righteousness of which Jeremiah speaks are as present in Jesus' abiding words, if we take them seriously, as they were in his first coming and will be in his second coming. *What we are promised is that Christ comes to be with us and for us.*

The second answer in the column on our *Jeopardy* board, under the category "promises," is Psalm 25:1-10. What question is it that this passage answers? I suggest it is the question, "Who has done the promising?" and its answer seems to be pretty straightforward. *It is the God of Psalm 25 who has done the promising.* It is the God who exhibits steadfast love and faithfulness; the God who is good and upright; and the God who forgives and forgets our sins and transgressions. It is the God who leads us into truth and teaches us.

It is the *God* who saves us. It is the *God* in whom we can put our trust. It is this *God* who has promised us the coming of *Christ* and the abiding presence of *Jesus* through his words, and because it is *this God* who has done the promising, we can be assured not only that what has been promised will be fulfilled, but that *what has been promised is for our good and with our best interest in mind.*

Picture the *Jeopardy* board one more time, please. Under the category "promises," there is yet another answer that these texts seem to be supplying. This time the texts are the one from Luke and the one from 1 Thessalonians, and the question is, "How should we wait for what has been promised?" Perhaps this is the most important question and answer on the board. We might even call it the Daily Double. We are to wait for what has been promised by doing what *Jesus* instructs us to do in this passage from Luke and Paul suggests we should do as well in the Thessalonian letter. What is it that they tell us?

Jesus says that we are to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near. What is promised to us is nothing less or other than our redemption, our deliverance, our salvation, the ultimate experience of this world being made whole as it was created to be originally. We are promised that *God* is at work for redemptive possibilities in all things, even the most evil things of this world. *God* is

actively laboring to redeem all things and to unite all things in Jesus Christ. That is something to look forward to; that is something to await with joy; that is something to expect with a sense of eager anticipation.

The future of God is a future of redemptive possibilities. Christ will come, as he has come and continues to come, to save us and all persons. Therefore we are to stand up and raise our heads and not run and hide or bury our heads in the sand. We are to have a positive and hopeful view of the future and not simply be negative and pessimistic all the time. We are to have faith in the God who is completely good and always is working for good in the world. We wait for what has been promised by looking forward to it.

Jesus also says that we are to look at what is going on around us. We are to wait for what has been promised by being aware of what is happening in the world and learning to see our part and God's part in it. I don't think Jesus means for us to take a "lame duck" approach to life. I don't believe he would have us twiddle our thumbs, waiting for God alone to do something about our world. That certainly is not the approach to life that the early church took, and they expected Jesus to return immediately. The first Christians, even though they believed in Christ's immanent return, were actively engaged in the world in evangelism and missions. I think we are to be involved, as Jesus says

elsewhere, by being "in the world but not of the world." That means applying Jesus' abiding words to the situations we face.

I get a little put out with well-meaning Christians who seem to look around at what is happening in the world to be sure, but all they tend to see are the bad things. All they want to talk about is how godless the world is and how we are going to hell in a hurry. I really don't believe that is the only option for us as followers of Jesus. I think we can look at what is going on in the world and see *God* at work. Things are happening in our world that I, for one, never thought possible, and the only reason I think they have become possible is because *God* is with us and for us and working to make redemption a reality.

Not only does Jesus say that we are to look positively into the future and be aware of and stay involved in what is happening in the present, he also instructs us not to let our worries overcome us. Instead we are to be alert and in prayer for strength. The Apostle Paul prays in 1 Thessalonians that strength be given so that we may be found to be holy and blameless before *God*.

Jesus says to us, in essence, "Don't sweat it; it will all be alright in the end." He says that we are to be on guard, but we are to guard against being overly anxious and fearful and depressed. My friend, Matt Gaston, who now serves FUMC in Denton, has suggested that

worry is a mild form of atheism. Let's take that seriously, folks. Let's have just a little more faith in the God who promises his presence with us and who already has fulfilled that promise in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Let's put a little more trust in the God whom the psalmist describes as full of mercy and steadfast love. Let's have a little more faith in the God who has come through for us and will continue to do so even to the end of time. So let's don't allow ourselves to become paralyzed and incapacitated by our worries and our fears, but instead concentrate our efforts on being close to God through study and prayer.

In the movie *2010*, the 1984 sequel to the classic film of 1968, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Keir Dullea, who plays the character Dave in both movies and whose fate is left rather mysterious in the first one, makes a reappearance in the second film to announce to certain individuals, including the computer HAL, what lies ahead. When asked specifically what is to take place, Dave simply says, "Something wonderful."

I think the stance of faith is to remember that God keeps his promises and to stand on the promises of God, professing that the past, present, and future are in God's hands. I believe that the stance of faith is to see that *in Christ God is busy doing something wonderful.* We are promised God's presence in Christ by the God who *is* good and

does good. Our response to what has been promised should be to wait positively and actively for it, not letting our anxieties get the best of us. What a word of hope, and what an appropriate word for this particular season of the year! Let us look forward together to the promises God will continue to keep and to the wonderful things God will continue to do with us and for us out of his mercy, steadfast love, and desire for justice and righteousness in the world.