

A promise is a wonderful and terrible thing.

Full of potential - a vehicle for hope - a shining light in darkness for those to whom the promise is made... and an obligation - a burden - a constant reminder of a thing not yet completed for the one who makes the promise. We could, if we chose, measure our lives in promises made, promises kept, and promises broken. They tell a tale of what we value. They shape relationships. They can topple empires and assure dynasties. ***In human hands***, a promise is meant to be a sacred trust...until it's not.

We are wary of those who seem to promise too much. We each develop our own sense of where that line might be - handing out trust in proportion to our experiences. For some, the 'art' of offering a promise has become very lucrative. Products are bought and sold on the strength of smooth words and wondrous claims, and billions of dollars change hands in pursuit of that one, sure thing. I will not dwell on the use of promises in the political realm - else this sermon becomes satire.

All this to say that in a world full of promises, we find ourselves following Jesus - himself the product of a promise that is both fulfilled and still waiting to bear fruit. We are caught in the promise paradox - people of the 'already, but not yet.' And Advent is, of all the seasons in the church calendar, very much the season of 'promise.'

Our story is wreathed in promise - the potential for a weary and wounded people to find peace by an act of divine grace. The daughters and sons of Abraham are clinging with grim determination to God's covenant promise that says - in effect - God will come to your rescue. God will grant you peace.

Often enough this has looked like a promise that cannot be kept, since it depends on God's people holding up their end of the bargain as well...and as history and experience has shown us, people aren't very good with promise-keeping.

But God is.

The constant refrain throughout the Hebrew Scriptures is that though the people have failed, God will not. Exile and defeat may be our current state, but the prophets remind us that the puzzle is not yet complete - the game is far from finished - there's work yet to be done, and God is already doing it.

That is the message that Jeremiah ultimately brings to the people of his time. Overrun by powerful enemies - cities and institutions full of corruption - people having abandoned any hope that God might give them even one slim chance, the prophet stands firm. Yes, we have failed, but God's specialty is turning our failure into divine triumph.

A righteous branch will spring up - executing judgement - defying our expectations, which have been ground down by the reality of our humanness. God has promised stability - God will provide constancy - God will see the salvation and safety of all those bound by the promise.

Even when we can't keep it, God can.

God will.

The certainty of the prophet is mystifying. It is not hard to see that the human condition is a long way from bliss. Then and now, we know what we know. People are tricky and promises are hard to keep. Rituals break down. Traditions change.

In Jeremiah's time, this looks like a country ruled by a foreign power - like people resigned to their fate. Like a religious establishment that has given up on the covenant and found solace in a convenient political alliance. And for us twenty-first century folks, any memory of past hopefulness is easily overwhelmed by the present reality.

And besides, those promises are so old - so dated - so 'way-back-in-time.' What have you done for us lately, God? That is the refrain of the modern mind - the song of the secular age, in every age.

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"Who do the people say I am?" This not-so-innocent question comes from Jesus on the heels of some really miraculous work. Four thousand have been fed. A blind man made to see. The religious authorities have their doubts, and Jesus has condemned their false piety. It's been a pretty productive and hectic time, so Jesus and his disciples head to the fringes of the metropolis. And Jesus asks his question - a set-up, really - for all that will soon happen.

Early responses are telling. John the Baptist! Elijah! A prophet from the good old days! This is the safe ground. Better to think that the promise is being repackaged for modern ears than to dare to imagine that the promise is unfolding in front of your eyes.

"But who do YOU say I am?"

Peter is too eager to be fooled. Peter does not know how to 'spin' the things he has seen. This can only be God at work. This is the promise personified.

"You are the Messiah."

Anointed (in the Hebrew) a word reserved for Kings. *Christos* in the Greek - *the chosen one*. This is promise time according to Peter... and Jesus warns them all not to tell.

Not now. Not yet. Too easy to assume that the promise is found only in the moment, when in fact, the promise needs to express itself - to unfold in the fullness of time - to open the mysteries of God's covenant to generation after generation

And now that the story can be told - the story must be told. The promise lives in these ancient words, and is brought to life in us by the sense of wonder and glorious hope that is born when ever we deck the halls and trim the tree - whenever we turn on the Christmas music and tell the old, old story of unlikely parents and astonished shepherds, and a remarkable birth.

Christ is coming!

Let creation from its groans and labour cease;

Let the glorious proclamation hope restore and faith increase

Christ is coming! Christ is coming!

Come, O blessed Prince of peace.

- John Ross MacDuff - PCC Book of Praise #797