

For this period leading to Christmas, I'm going to talk about five characteristics of this season of our faith in a series called "Christmas Classified" – classified as in how we can classify or characterize the Christmas experience.

We all know that the birth of Jesus is important, critical, absolutely necessary for our faith. But I want us to think more deeply about Christmas than that. I want us to think beyond the lights, the trees, the festive music, colorful decorations, and the seasonal sales.

The characteristic of Christmas that I want to deal with today is a word we all know: promise. Fundamental to the Christmas story, fundamental to the very fabric of Christmas is God's fulfilled promise.

To most of you, none of the Bible texts we look at today will be new; don't let that stop you from listening with fresh ears.

Isaiah 7. King Ahaz of Judah is scared. He's afraid his nation is going to be overrun by the alliance between Israel to his north and Assyria to his east. God tells the prophet Isaiah to tell King Ahaz to stop worrying, the invasion Ahaz fears will never happen. In that setting, Isaiah says to Ahaz, ask for a sign, any sign, King. I want you to believe God. Ahaz says, I don't need a sign.... He's lying. So Isaiah says – and these are the words most of us know well – **(7.14-16).....**

So Isaiah tells Ahaz a child will be born that will prove God's faithfulness, that will prove the feared invasion will not take place. What Isaiah gives to Ahaz is not only a sign, but a promise: A child will be born. You can count on it, King. Those words about a young woman giving birth to a child who is a sign of God's faithfulness, the Gospel of Matthew takes as a promise fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. It's in **Matthew 1**. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream. The angel says, go ahead with your plans to marry Mary even though she's pregnant and you had no part in it because that child will be a fulfillment of God's promise.

The Christmas story is filled with promises. **Isaiah 9.** I know we've heard these words countless times before; hear them now in terms of the promise it delivers **(vv.2, 6-7).....** Did you hear it? People who walk in darkness WILL see a great light. The government WILL be upon his shoulders and will never end. His name WILL be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It's a promise from God.

Luke 1. Zechariah is a priest in the temple. He and his wife Elizabeth are childless. An angel tells Zechariah that they're going to be parents. **(vv.13-17)....** It's a promise. God WILL. When you read those words in the Bible, read them as words of divine promise.

And finally, also in **Luke 1**. Mary receives a promise **(vv.30-37).....** You can't have missed all the WILLs. You WILL. They WILL. The Lord WILL. Promises every one.

The birth of Jesus is a gift to us, of course. But it is more than a gift; it's a fulfillment of a promise. When we get to the manger in a few weeks, we will witness the grace and mercy of God, the loving kindness of God to give us Heaven in a form we can understand, human form. But we will also witness God's faithfulness: when God makes a promise, God keeps a promise.

Talk to the Core and More Bible study people. One of the central discoveries of our three year exploration of the Old Testament was that God keeps promises. When God says I will do this, I will be there, I will make a way for you, that's what happens.

Christmas is not only the celebration of a gift; it is the fulfillment of a promise.

Why are fulfilled promises so important? Because they inspire trust and confidence. We finished an election cycle earlier this month. What do we say we want but never get from our politicians? Keep your promises. Do what you say you're going to do. What's one of our chief complaints against politicians? They don't keep their promises.

What do parents want from their kids? If you say you're going to clean up your room, then clean up your room.

What do kids need from their parents? If you say you're going to love me, if you say you're going to provide for me, then do so. Keep your promise!

Fulfilled promises: We want them from our leaders; we want them from our families and friends; we want them from our employers and employees; we want them from our God, because we want to be able to trust. In a world filled with violence and injustice and despair, we crave to be able to trust somebody.

Whatever you thought of the decision announced this week that a grand jury in St Louis county, Missouri, would not indict the police officer involved in the shooting of Michael Brown, you have to agree that in the community of Ferguson and around the country there millions of Americans desperate to be able to trust someone, to hear someone say we're going to fix this system, and you will be able to believe it; to hear someone in authority say we're going to treat you right, and have good reason to trust them. You might think our system needs no fixing – your business – if you attended last Sunday night's worship here, you know I disagree, but that's okay. Whatever you and I think, there are millions of our fellow citizens who no longer trust our justice system, and they are desperate for someone to keep a promise to bring justice for all into our justice system.

You may be desperate this morning, in your own way. Desperate to believe things are going to turn around. Desperate for progress in a broken relationship. Desperate for a resolution to a long standing conflict. Desperate for whatever. The Christmas story responds to your desperation, to the desperation of people who hunger for justice, to the desperation of people haunted by the violence of warfare, to the desperation of people whom our ongoing economic recovery has missed, the desperation of people like, Zechariah and Elizabeth, have given up on their dreams, people who have surrendered to the emptiness that has filled their lives.

God keeps promises and the greatest promise of all is about to be fulfilled. I will never leave you or forsake you. I will never give up on you. I will make a way for you. I will come and live with you. If you walk in darkness, I will bring you light. If you need a sign, wow are you going to get one. If you need somebody to depend on, to rely on, to believe in, somebody who does what they say they will do, I will be the one. Justice may seem slow and sometimes impossible. But I'm not. I'll prove it to you, I'll keep my promise, in a manger. Wait and see.

Now promises don't matter much if we don't believe them. Here's the last sentence in our Isaiah passage **(7.9)**..... It was up to Ahaz to believe God's promise. As it was for Abraham and Moses and David and all of Israel, as it was for the disciples who heard the resurrected Jesus say I am with you always to the close of the age, and as it is for us faith is not an option.

Faith is the fuel of miracles – read the Gospels – and faith is the fuel for God's promises in your life. You want to experience the joy of God's promise in your life this Christmas? Don't wait for me to convince you. Don't expect the lights and decorations to convince you. It's up to you. Believe.