

13th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
August 22, 2021

Text: Joshua 24:1-2a and 14-18

Theme: Serve the Lord

God of justice and mercy, we pray for all those who suffer. Restore the spirits of those crushed by the devastating earthquake in Haiti and the terror-driven chaos in Afghanistan. We lift up the broken-hearted. Comfort those who mourn the loss of loved ones and those who fear for their safety. Amen

It was one of those hot and humid days when my granddaughter and I decided it was better to play indoors rather than outside. We spent the whole morning playing with Cinderella's castle and at some point she decided that the prince and princess needed to get married. Lacking the proper venue for such an important event I promised that I would build a church with a center aisle for the bride and groom, seats for the guests, and an altar for the minister (all from Legos). She asked – *Do you promise to build the whole thing?* I assured her that I could do this but that was not sufficient. She asked the same question in a slightly different way – *But do you promise to God?*

My six-year-old granddaughter seems to know the difference between the promises we make to one another and the ones we make to God. I must confess that her second question caught me off guard and made me pause. Without hesitation I made a promise to build her a church out of Legos but a promise to God had a heavier feel to it.

On my way home I started to think about all the promises we make to one another on so many different levels. On a personal level we are quick to promise people that we will keep in touch and/or if they need anything they should call us and we will be there for them. We make promises when we get married to stay together for as long as we both shall live. Corporations make promises that assure us their products are the very best. I can hear the Geico commercial now: 15 minutes or less can save you 15% or more on car insurance.

Based on the events of the week I started to think about the promises we will make to the people in Haiti to help them recover from both the earthquake and subsequent storms.

I listen to the questions and answers asked at news conferences on whether we will guarantee the safe return of all Americans currently in Afghanistan.

When we keep our promises or when others keep their promises it is a beautiful thing. It is a blessing. But broken promises erode trust.

I was still not home so my train of thought traveled to the promises we make to God. Immediately I thought about baptism. No matter our religious background most parents bring their infants and young children to the church to be baptized. They want that guarantee that their child will be saved. But as part of the baptismal rite parents are also asked to commit to a list of responsibilities. They are to read the Bible to their children on a regular basis. They are to teach them the basics of a Christian faith, bring them to a house of worship, and nurture them in faith and prayer. At the end of the litany the parents will be asked – *Do you promise to help your child grow in the Christian faith and life?* And in my twenty-six years of ministry every single parent has said – *I do.*

We make these promises with good intentions but then we discover it is rather difficult to honor our commitments. But the burden cannot be put solely on the parents as the church also needs to encourage and nurture the faith of our children. Our worship and our ministries need to be welcoming and inviting.

I wonder if it would make a difference if I asked parents and included the congregation in the same question stated a slightly different way – *Do we promise to God to help our children grow in the Christian faith and life?* And instead of a simple – *I do* – perhaps the response should be – *We do and we ask God to help and guide us.*

From baptism I moved quickly to thoughts of confirmation. Once those babies and young children grow up to be teenagers then that same list of responsibilities is read to them so that they can answer for themselves.

An Anglican clergyman who served a small parish near Cambridge, England had three children who were all confirmed on the same day. To commemorate the occasion he wrote the hymn (O Jesus, I Have Promised). He told his children that the hymn included all the truths he wanted them to remember.

What are those truths? We promise to serve the Lord to the end of our days. We say that we will not fear the battle called life or wander from the path set before us. We ask God to protect us from the temptations of the world that drive us to break our commitments to him. In the hymn we also hear the promises of God that are binding.

What has God promised? God has promised to be there for us in all things and in all ways. God has promised to be the light in our darkness (to forgive us when we mess up). God has promised to be slow to anger and abound in steadfast love. God has promised his Son, Jesus Christ, to deliver us from our sins. God has promised his Holy Spirit to be our advocate until Christ comes again. God has promised us eternal life.

For our part we are to worship the one and only true God, to create a community where the love of God can be made known to others, to treat each other with love and respect, and to take care of creation. Yet throughout the story of the Bible, the people of God found it impossible to keep their side of the covenant relationship (as do we).

But here is how the covenant with God is so different from any other relationship we have with others. God promises to accompany us no matter where we go or what we do. God will be with us not only when we prosper but also when we suffer. Even when we fail to live up to our promises God will never fail to live up to the covenant God has made with us. God will always engage with us and bring us back into the fold. God will continue to remind us of the gift of life that is ours through Christ Jesus. God is serious about his relationship with us and God wants us to be serious about our relationship with him.

In our Old Testament lesson we learn how serious God is about the promises we make to him. Joshua has gathered all the tribes of Israel together before they enter the land of Canaan. Joshua reminds the people of all that the Lord has done on their behalf – how he gave birth to a nation through Abraham and Sarah, how he delivered them through the sea and provided for them when they were in the wilderness. It was God who led them into the battles they won. Before they moved into a new territory God wanted them to promise to worship him and no other gods and to serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.

When we continue to read beyond our lesson for today the people state that they will serve the Lord (and no other). Joshua challenged their bold claim and with even greater earnestness they said – *No, we will serve the Lord!* Joshua knew how easily they walked away from the Lord in the past so he pushed them even harder a third time and they insisted they would serve the Lord. Finally Joshua acquiesced and made a covenant with them that day.

The people did not make a promise to Joshua. They made a promise to God. Joshua wrote their words in the book of the law of God that would later hold them accountable. It is that sense of accountability that makes our promises to God feel heavier to us. We should take our promises to God seriously and pause before we do or say anything that is counter to his will. But no matter what we can trust that our relationship with God will remain intact forever. Because a promise from God will never be broken. Amen