

Remembering God's Promises

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 12-13, 2019
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the crime and drama programs I like to watch, I have noticed again and again that the authorities, mostly the detectives who are hell bent on solving a crime, make promises that are hard to keep. "I promise I will find your kidnapped child." "I promise I will find the person who did this to you." Sometimes when people are badly injured or terribly sick, promises are made. People who care say things like, "I'm sure this will work out." "He will get better." "Everything will be all right."

But life is not a television drama or a film. The answers don't all come in less than an hour. We do not always get back what we have lost. And, in real life, situations do not always "get better."

By the time we are in second grade, we know this.

But still there is power in promises. A promise is a verbal assurance to oneself or others that a commitment has been made and will be kept. A promise is a vow to *desist*... not do something. Or to *deliver* ... I will do something. "I promise I will not be late again." "I promise I will not take the car without asking." "I promise I will give back the money I borrowed." "I will call you back." "I will love you forever."

I won't, I won't. I will, I will.

Promises are powerful. When we keep our promises, it shows that we have acted as we said we would, we have kept our pledge, and our word is good. The power of a promise kept is that it creates reliability, predictability, and security to be counted on.

Promises build trust in relationship. [1]

Even if we are not solving a crime or trying to say the right thing in a painful situation, keeping promises is hard to do. Some people opt out by making as few commitments as possible. But making promises is good for us.

Our promises with each other—our commitments to be there—build the trust and love we need.

This weekend we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord as we continue in the Season of Epiphany. The color is white. With a bright light, we see and hear that Jesus is the

Beloved Son. He is claimed in the Jordan as God's own, the Chosen One. The promises of God will be lived through him.

The color will be white again at the end of Epiphany when the disciples gather on the mountain and Jesus is again endorsed as Beloved. The light of that time will lead to the cross and into the Season of Lent.

In the Season of Light, for many weeks we will read, listen, confess, pray, ponder and sing about who Jesus is—born to Mary—and to us.

Before Christmas was ever celebrated, the early Christians remembered and celebrated the Baptism of Jesus. This event was recorded in all four Gospels, while the birth story is told in only two!

What the Gospel writers are getting at is that God's promise of TRUSTWORTHY LOVE is lived out in the humanity and ministry of Jesus.

What does *divine promise keeping* look like? Listen to Jesus. Pay attention to what he's up to: the healing, feeding, forgiving, including, teaching and praying ...

Luke's agenda, in his Gospel and in Acts, is that Jesus is the model for the apostles and for the church. What Jesus does, we can do. Really.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus was baptized *with all* of the people. He did not have his own special day. It was a group event. In our own baptisms we are claimed and named as Beloved. We are affirmed. The promise of TRUSTWORTHY LOVE is given.

In baptism we are given the power—the gifts—to keep the promises of God in the world. We both *receive* and *make* a promise.

Even the most independent among us need promises in our lives. We need to make them and to keep them. Promises build trust and relationships need them.

I read an article about the power of promises with adolescents. For parent and teenager to work well together, each must keep their word.

For example, after a troubling incident—like a wrecked car or a ticket (which happened at our house many times!)—we look for verification: “Do you promise this is how it really happened?” And a vow: “Do you promise not to do this again?”

Even if we are not parents or teenagers, we need to tell each other the truth. Broken promises and untruths can break a relationship. Broken promises diminish our self-confidence and self esteem.

After Christmas, when we were packing my mother up to move to a new assisted living space, I found a small box in her drawer. Mostly it contained gloves she hasn't worn in a

hundred years. In it was a piece of paper from a hotel in Copenhagen. It was an apology from my brother, who got caught smoking at about age sixteen. (As the youngest, he got to go on trips while I was away working hard at college!) In it he said, “Mom, I am really, really sorry about the smoking, and *I promise to never do it again*. Love, Paul.”

The “Love” was underlined about ten times. With an exclamation point! The “60-year-old, promise-making” Paul was with me when we were packing. And I said, in somewhat of a big sister way, “Well, now that didn’t *exactly* work out.” It took a while. (He quit when he was about 38.) My mother didn’t hold it against him. She struggled with quitting herself.

It’s a funny thing what we save. In my own drawer I have a note from one son to the other from when they were teens. “Sorry Gregg, I borrowed \$100. Don’t worry. [underlined] I will pay you back when I get home. Please [underlined] don’t tell Grandma!”

It seems Ed and I were away and Grandma was in charge. I don’t remember anyone getting in trouble for this. And I assume the older brother paid the younger back.

I remember years before hearing my younger son giving his brother some “how to get along with mom advice.” I must have been upset with Alex, the big brother. From the other room I heard, “Alex, just tell Mom you are really, really sorry and promise to never, ever do this again.”

I am just about positive that he didn’t follow his brother’s advice.

Promises are hard to keep. Even when we are not teenagers or children.

Promises are expressions of intent, large and small, that cover a wide range of interpersonal events, from marriage to finishing an assignment. We declare an objective: We will love our partner for life. We will *never* do the thing the other person does not want us to (like smoking ... or borrowing money without permission). Or we will *always* do the thing they want us to do. We *will* get the job done.

But our feelings, capacity, or circumstances change over time, and this makes keeping promises harder. The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the birth of a child, falling in love, or developing illness—all can shift our feelings and behavior. We may no longer have the capability or willingness to keep a specific promise. *There are times it may no longer benefit others to do so.* [2]

Sometimes we make promises with good intentions but ignore our feelings of doubt, fear, and uncertainty. Sometimes we make promises we can’t keep because we are reluctant to face painful realities.

Luke tells us that Jesus was baptized with all of the people. Still, for us, Baptism is a community event. The promises made to us and with us are made publicly. We have each other!

Here, we gather to join with each other. In our common confession we acknowledge our fears and failings, our need for each other, and our willingness to build and rebuild trust. Life together in this faith community connects and reconnects us to the promises of God.

Here we confess and accept the complexity of humanity. And we remember that Jesus joined the people in the Jordan, he lined up with the fearful and broken people who needed God. People who longed for promises.

The promise of God's trustworthy love is not meant to be stashed in a drawer, saved with a baptismal certificate ... or a note ... but to be lived and shared. Promises are lived out in our relationships. Every day and every New Year.

Who knows what this year will bring? We look ahead and make plans, set goals. We have expectations. We may even dare to dream dreams. Some us find work, others will retire. Some will graduate while others will begin school. Some will learn to walk and talk, and others will age and slow down.

There will be set backs and celebrations, disasters and achievements, heartache and great joy. And the good news—the PROMISE—is that loving PRESENCE will be with us and for us.

The words of trustworthy love are not new. For many years I've read the words from the prophet Isaiah at the bedside of the dying:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior....
you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you.

—Isaiah 43:1-4, NRSV

Luke tells us the people were filled with expectation. We, too, can be filled.

Our church calendar is ancient. Its rhythm reminds us, pulls us, and holds us in the Promise.

Our promises with each other, our commitments to be there, build the trust and the love we need.

It is no small thing to be BELOVED.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Pickhardt, Ph.D., Carl E., "Adolescence and the Power of Promises," PsychologyToday.com, October 1, 2018.

[2] Ritter, Ph.D., Melissa, "Why We Can't Keep Our Promises, PsychologyToday.com, June 8, 2014.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- *Reflect on a long-ago made promise that you are still waiting to be realized, or a promise that you are fulfilling over a lifetime, or a promise you still plan to achieve.*
- *What do you expect from the promises made you in baptism?*
- *What does the promise for new life mean to you? Where have you seen "a dove" descend?*
- *As one who is BELOVED, what "new thing" might you embrace this New Year?*