

November 29, 2009 1st Sunday in Advent *Don't Miss the Promise!*
 Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Did you hear what the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament declares?

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise...” Jeremiah 33:14a

In the Gospel of Luke this morning Jesus names all kinds of signs, things that will begin to happen to him and in all creation and he says,

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near...when you see these things taking place, you know the kingdom of God is near.” Luke 21:28, 31

Jesus is so sure that God will fulfill the promise that he warns

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with ... worries of this life, so that day does not catch you unexpectedly. Luke 21:34

In this same spirit, did you hear Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians pray

may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...may God also strengthen your hearts in holiness, that you may be blameless before God the Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints.

I Thessalonians 3:11, 13

The church today at the beginning of this season of Advent adorns our worship with greenery, Chrismon Tree, and Advent Wreath—all kinds of signs that the reign of God is very near—signs and reminders that God will fulfill the promise. The Scripture declares the promise, the church prepares for the promise, God will keep the promise. The kingdom of God is very near, your redemption is coming closer and closer every day. Don't miss the promise. Don't miss the promise.

You see, Jeremiah knows, Jesus knows, Paul knows, and the church knows that people of God live by the promise. People of God live by the promise of God because most of the evidence they see in everyday life tends to prove anything but the kingdom of God is very near. I mean these very signs Jesus himself names (unnatural changes in nature, distress and conflict among people and nations) these seem to be evidence of God's lack of control, sure signs that people don't follow God, storms and stress all around us that keep us wary of the truth of the promise of God. But people of God live by the promise. That promise, you see, was planted in your heart in the very beginning. You were created in the image of God and no matter how far your life has strayed from that image of God in which you were created it is still there in you. And the promise of its restoration to the very center of your life again? Well, God will keep that promise. The promise of its restoration to all of creation again? Well, God will keep that promise, too. Don't miss the promise.

The problem is you and I have strayed so far from that image of God in which we were created that the promise seems so distant, such a forlorn hope, sometimes even a pipedream. Having strayed so far you begin to feel that redemption, restoration, the kingdom of God is far, far away. Rather than drawing closer and closer each day it almost begins to feel as if it's slipping completely away. You begin to forget from time to time that you are not your own but you are God's. You live so independently, so much on your own, making your own way until sometimes you even forget who God is or at least do not recognize the gracious hand of God in your life when it is so often extended to you. In bad times you count it good luck or being fortunate or praise your own ability to tough out the hard times and you praise your own skill and intelligence in the good times. And when you do that you miss the promise when God keeps the promise for you.

But God is very patient. God never stops loving you no matter how far you stray, how much you forget, how independently you live. By God's grace from time to time you come to church, you see the greenery and signs of Advent, you sing a Christmas Carol, and the truth begins to come back to you again. God's people live by the promise. Everything you have, everything good you have accomplished, every single time you've been saved from your own mistakes, every time you have suffered the consequences of your own bad choices and came out the better for it, every time you felt you just couldn't make it but, somehow, you did, God keeps the promise. God's promise of love that never lets you go. God's promise of a restored and fulfilled creation. You may forget but God never forgets.

Marian Roach and her husband are members of a congregation in Troy, New York. They have befriended a number of the older members of the congregation and often found themselves attracted to those whose lives had been affected by that dreaded disease called Alzheimer's. Although they cannot remember you and so many have forgotten the names of their own children they still seem to enjoy going to church. On one particular Sunday morning Marian's husband decided to try to engage in conversation with one particular woman. Though disease kept her hunched over and her hands curled close together she seemed to be there most every Sunday. He knelt down to her level to try and get her attention but was unsuccessful in greeting her that morning. She remained unmoved, bent over, her hands clenched tight. He wished her well as he returned to his place in the pew. But as the worship service began and the organist played the introduction to the morning hymn, "How Great Thou Art," she began to straighten up in her wheelchair, her hands opened, and she sang that hymn seated straight and tall, not missing a word. When the hymn was over she leaned over again and her hands curled closed.

Commentary by Marian Roach, All Things Considered, National Public Radio, November 28, 2000

The promise, the promise, it's in your heart. That image of God in you is still there. The promise is in your heart. Now you may not have Alzheimer's disease or arthritis today but you and I are certainly "weighed down," as Jesus warns, by so many things, so many worries, so many stresses of this life; so weighed down that you just forget. Sisters and brothers, God's promise is so sure, God's promise is so true that no disease, no loss of memory, no sin, no bad decisions, no consequences, no straying from the promise can ever take it away from you. God keeps the promise.

As you have come to worship on this very first Sunday in Advent we remember together that God keeps the promise in a miraculous birth. The baby born in Bethlehem and lying in a manger, suffers and dies on a cross and rises from the dead. By the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord your redemption is drawing closer and closer every single day. When you live by that promise you won't miss it when God keeps it.

That dear woman knew and remembered every word of that hymn, in this season there is another hymn, a carol which, in my experience, calls to remembrance in our hearts the promise of God deep within us, no matter how far we have strayed from it. And so as you begin to prepare in worship today, at the very beginning of this season of Advent, to receive again this great gift of God's own Son at Christmas, sit up straight and tall, raise your hands, and let us sing together right now, "Silent Night...."

Sisters and brothers, the Scripture declares the promise, the church prepares for the promise, God will keep the promise. Don't you miss the promise. Don't miss the promise.

William G. Davidson