

The Promise We Cannot Keep
Mark 14:1-15:39

“Even though all become deserters, I will not.”

Having spent the season of Lent ringing the changes on the promises God made to us through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jeremiah, promises God kept in Jesus Christ, now we leave the season of Lent and enter Holy Week, the week when God calls our bluff in this “on again, off again” relationship that was originated by the God who chose not to be God without us.

This is Passion Sunday, when the church remembers the entire last week of Jesus’ life in one hour. We do this because the next time most Christians show up is on Easter and, without the back story, our alleluias will be meaningless. The part of the Passion sung by the choir this morning begins on the evening of the first day of Passover, when the lamb is sacrificed to mark God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the same God who is about to deliver humankind from the thrall of death. During supper with his disciples, Jesus announces that *one* among them will betray him. The news is devastating enough; but then, on the way to the place called Gethsemane where he will pray, he tells the remaining eleven that they will all become deserters. In response, Peter says, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” It is the promise we cannot keep.

We have known this about ourselves from the beginning in another garden. In that garden, the promise of note is the serpent’s. “You will not die,” the serpent says to our mythic forebears, making a promise that is only God’s to make. Nevertheless, you and I believe and live in the light of the serpent’s promise, a promise that makes us fearful of anything in life that threatens us with the possibility of death. Jesus, of course, does just that. “For those who want to save their life will lose it,” he said to the crowd at the bottom the mountain after his

Transfiguration, “and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” This basic truth about life with God is why we cannot keep our promise, cannot live in relation to God, cannot help but desert God’s Son as he goes to his death, which is, in fact, our own.

The Garden of Eden simply anticipates what seems to be so about us: given the choice, we choose to do everything in our power to prolong the lives we are living without God. Hence death’s hold over our lives has made us prone to evil and slothful in good; has caused us to follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts; has tempted us, time and time again, to leave undone those things which we ought to have done and do those things which we ought not do. When I open the Bible in search of a story that tells me why I cannot keep my promise to live in relation to God, why I cannot give my future self, my life and my death, into God’s keeping, why I will desert him who will not desert me, it is this first garden that nails me.

Yet the story of the second garden would seem to insist that the consequences of our broken promises to God are even darker than our imaginations can dare. In the thrall of death, and so fearful for our lives, we choose to live not simply without God in the world, but in opposition to God in the world. Suddenly we are not dealing with the benign neglect of a relationship: we are dealing with deicide, hidden masterfully beneath what we truly believe to be our better, our wiser, our more mature selves. Who needs God when we know so much better?

To wit: under the guise of doing good, the crack in the relationship begins to show early in the week, when the disciples condemn the extravagance of an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus for death with costly oil rather than use the money for the poor; when Judas believes his revolutionary zeal trumps Jesus’ revelatory love; when the scribes critique Jesus by religion and reason rather than falling silent in the presence of revelation. In each case, the good and evil we

have chosen to know instead of God leads us to do what we can to live in relation to God's Son—ethically, politically, intellectually—as though he were dead.

Yet the gospel on this dark week, for those of us who go to this book in search of ourselves-ever-sought-out by the God who keeps his promises, is that what we purpose for ill, God purposes for good. As the story unfolds, each encounter becomes the occasion for God to call the bluff of every character in this “on again, off again” relationship that is faith, knowing that the promise human beings cannot keep is about to be kept for us, according to Mark, by God's Son.

Here, then, is what keeping the promise looks like. In Gethsemane, Mark tells us that Jesus began to be distressed and agitated. He says of himself, “I am deeply grieved, even to death.” Having assumed our mortal life, he is under the power of death no less than we. Therefore, Jesus first prays as we do: “Remove this cup from me.” In other words, do what I command, God. Trust my judgment for once. Watch me pull this one out of the fire. Not as you will, but as I will. But the prayer goes on and, in the next breath, the breath when we excuse ourselves from the relationship, Jesus reveals the relationship for which we were made. It is not that Jesus has the little self-restraint and little courage that we lack; rather he is, according to Mark, God's Son, the beloved, in whom God's reign has begun, and through whom God's triumph over death will be accomplished. Every moment of his life and now, at the moment of his death, he is one with God. For us he prays, “Yet not what I will, but what you will.” “In my mind,” writes fellow pastor-theologian Mark Davis, “the last phrase of this prayer is what makes Jesus the Christ.”

The prayer we are incapable of praying, is, of course, our deepest prayer: that our life belong not to us but to God; that our will be not our own, but God working in us; that our days

be held in God's safekeeping; that our deaths be given over to God's gracious mercy and protection. In this one who does not eat of the tree but hangs upon it, in the person of Jesus Christ, we behold the one who keeps God's promise to us (never again to destroy us, not to be God without us, never to withdraw his steadfast love from us) *and* the one who keeps our promise of fealty, the promise we cannot keep, to God.

Daily you and I live as though we dwell East of Eden, as characters stalked relentlessly by death; but first and finally and so much more, we are deserters sought relentlessly by God in the garden of Gethsemane and beneath the cross, where human lives turn not on the tree that promises our God-like-ness, but on the Golgotha tree that promises God-with us, in life and in death. My friends, the death-haunted days East of Eden are behind us and the time when there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain is at hand. "Sweet Eve" wrote Davie Napier in Adam's voice,

"Sweet Eve, you say you thought you heard him laugh?
I heard him say, 'How can I give you up?
How can I hand you over?' Then a word
about another silly little tree--
an antidotal tree, redemptive tree.
And then--this must be when you thought he laughed--
I think I heard him sob.
I think he wept."