

Promises, Promises

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-22

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you”

In a world of broken promises on this first Sunday after Epiphany, I am thinking about God’s promise. The most significant thing to notice about *God’s* promise, my late friend and theologian Robert Jenson says, is that “it poses a future in a very particular way: as gift. All the rest of *our* communication,” Jens says, “various as it is, shares one common character: it poses a future not as a gift but as an obligation.” We say things like “If you do such-and-such, then such and such will happen.” So it goes in Washington—or not! In this way, *we* pose a future that is bound to a past. But God alone promises in the opposite way. God says, “Because I will do such-and-such, you may await such-and-such.” So “whereas other communication makes the future dependent on the past, [God’s] promise makes the past depend on the future, for it grants a future free from the past. Another word for this sort of promise,” Jens says, “is ‘forgiveness.’”

The church acts out this sort of promise in the sacrament of baptism. Today we tell the story of Jesus’ baptism and remember our dying in the waters of baptism to the life we were living without God, our dying to sin, and our being born into a whole new life, into a whole new family, as God’s child. The baptized wake each morning and begin again to live as beings who are destined to become human in God’s love. If anyone is in Christ, Brian said to you this morning, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

So far, so good, except for the fact that the life of the baptized often looks, to all the world, exactly like the life of the unbaptized. Concerning our part of the promise post-baptism, we live forgetting God. Concerning God’s part of the promise post-baptism, God apparently continues to make the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. Surely that is what Second Isaiah observed as he spoke to the children of God’s promise living in exile. “When you pass through the waters...and through the rivers; when you walk through the fire...and the flame...” Bad things are happening in Babylon to God’s people and in Philadelphia and in Bethlehem and in Damascus. Apparently the same God who said, in the previous chapter, “I have taken you by the hand and kept you,” is the God whose promises in the next chapter have nothing to do with protecting God’s people from the death-dealing powers of rising waters or raging fires or ruthless despots.

What, then, is God’s promise good for? What exactly is God promising if God is not promising a life set somewhat free from sorrow and pain, from suffering and grief? Listen again to the promise God makes to exiles who are beginning to believe the evidence of God’s absence. The promise is not that they will be spared deep waters, nor is God’s promise a promise of protection against fire and flame, for that would be a false promise. Because God has given God’s people the gift of mortal life and has set them in a world where death-dealing powers presently vie for human allegiance, God’s promise is a promise within limits. Therefore God promises not “if” but “*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.”

That is to say, life will continue to throw punches our way post-baptism, so let me rephrase the question: what difference does God’s promise make? What difference does it make in the midst of the fray when you are down for the count that God has promised to be with you? Well, for the last twenty-three years, *you* have been telling *me* that God’s promise to be with you has made all the difference in the world. “How do people get through this,” you ask me in a hospital room or walking away from an open grave or in the midst of some great upheaval, “without God in their lives and the church by their side?” The question makes me think presently of Martin Luther’s struggle with doubt and depression. Believing he was literally doing battle with the devil, Luther wrote in chalk on his desk each morning: *Baptizatus sum. I am baptized.* First person singular, perfect passive indicative (Thank you, Margaret Spencer!). Likewise, I keep my baptismal certificate on my dresser to remind me that, no matter how deep the waters or how hot the flame, God will not abandon me, because I too do not know how I would make it through this mortal life without God’s promise to be with me, a promise God keeps without limits in Jesus Christ.

But as important as the first person singular, perfect passive indicative is, more must be said. And the more has to do with the third person plural present imperative lives we live publicly in response to the epiphany of God's light in the darkness, to the manifestations of God's tender mercies in this weary world, to the revealing of God reign in most every reversal of fortune. "The difference," another late friend and theologian Paul Lehmann insists, "is that for believers...the [*reign of God-with-us*] is revealed; in the world (that is, among unbelievers) it is hidden. The church," he says, "lives as the people who know that the victory has been won. The world lives on as if nothing had happened. The church realizes that the powers which militate against God's [promises] are under control. The world lives on as if these powers were still able to shape the ultimate destiny of [mortals]. The difference between believers and unbelievers is not defined by church membership, or even, in the last analysis, by baptism," Lehmann says. Rather "...the difference...is a matter...of [behaving with] confidence and hope as against anxiety and despair, of behaving with abandon rather than with calculation, of being all things to all [people] rather than... 'pursuing selfish advantage...[and] compiling statistics of evil.'"

Let me therefore rephrase the question a third time: how does it happen that God's promise comes to make this sort of difference in the lives of God's children? In a word, Jesus Christ is how it happens. God sent his Son, his only Son, his Beloved into the waters of baptism and finally onto a cross to keep God's promise to be with us. In him God accompanies us as we venture into this world of anxiety and despair as a people of confidence and hope. In him God commands us to behave with love's abandon rather than with fearful calculation. In him God bids us quit little men pursuing selfish advantage to follow him whose self-giving love is our destination. Then there are the means of grace he has given to this community. We were baptized into a community that gathers on the first day of the week to ask anew, given the week just past, what the word of this promising God means. We are included in a community that acts out God's promises at the font and table without condition. How God's promise comes to make a difference in our lives and the life of the world has something to do with how the word spoken and the sacraments celebrated give us eyes to see God made manifestation in human history. To repeat what Brian said last week, we therefore begin to look for God-with-us in the places where the world does not look. And we begin to see God-with-us precisely in the places where the world says God is not (where the waters rise and the fires rage).

Now just in case, after all these words, you are still having trouble imagining the difference God's promises make, consider the Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, Jan Richardson says: "a wildly diverse congregation that includes people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets; and, as one person who struggles with mental illness declared, 'those of us who are crazy and those who think they're not.'"

"Years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to Hobson. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. She joined the new member class. The conversation about baptism—"this holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power it won't come undone," as Janet Wolf, their minister, put it—especially grabbed Fayette's imagination. Janet tells of how, during the class, Fayette would ask again and again, 'And when I'm baptized, I am...?' The class learned to respond, 'Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.' 'Oh, yes!' she'd say, and then we could go back to our discussion.

"The day of Fayette's baptism came... [She] went under, came up spluttering, and cried, 'And now I am...?' And [the congregation] sang, 'Beloved, precious child of God, beautiful to behold.' 'Oh, yes!' she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

"Two months later, Janet received a phone call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the country hospital. So I went," Janet writes. "I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth. When I got to the door, I heard, 'I am beloved...' She turned, saw me, and said, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and....' Catching sight of herself in the mirror—hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and....' She looked in the mirror again and declared, '...and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away.'

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." Remember your baptism and be grateful. Amen.