

I see everything these days through a new father's eyes. No one would fault me; it's just kind of how we're wired. But when it comes to preaching, this gets complicated. You see, I have recently made a promise that may disappoint some of you, a promise, no matter how tempting it might be, *not* to use my son in any sermon illustrations. No allegories for free will and predestination; no Trinitarian metaphors; no easy images for God's grace. I made this vow at the behest of a longtime friend, himself both a father and a preacher. I made it knowing that any child of mine would have enough problems already without the need to have public exegesis done about his every moment. I made it knowing it was the right and noble thing to do.

And then I get a preaching text like ours today, and I am reminded how decidedly inconvenient nobility can sometimes be. I may be reading with a new father's eyes – which is undoubtedly what I will hear in the narthex after the service – but it seems to me that first and foremost the question in our text today is about the Things We Do to Children. Bear with me for a few minutes. We'll get there.

First let's catch up with Israel. God freed them from Egypt – surely you remember that part. In the wilderness, with the covenant at Sinai freshly on their hearts, Israel sends a group of spies into the promised land to scout out the territory. The spies bring back a variety of reports, but the most widely believed – and, by the way, the most groundless – is that there are great armies waiting to strike Israel down should they attempt to enter the land. It's bad reporting. It's fear-mongering. It's propaganda. It's the first recorded example of cable news, and it works. The people are terrified. They say: surely we cannot defeat such armies, even with God on our side. It would have been better off had we never left Egypt: let's go back, back to Pharaoh, back to slavery.

Which is where we pick up today. God comes to Moses, furious that the people are losing their faith. "How long will they despise me?" he asks. "I will send pestilence against them. I will cut them off. The promises I made? Done. Finished. Forget it. You want to be on your own? Fine. We'll see how that goes."

But Moses argues back. In some ways it's a prayer; this summer we at PCCH are preaching through what Walter Brueggemann calls the Great Prayers of the Old Testament, and, after last week's journey with Abraham, this is our second stop, a kind of case study in intercessory prayer. But, honestly, it could just as easily be a case study at a business seminar for negotiation tactics.

Tactic #1: appeal to vanity. Moses says: God, you swore you'd get us to the promised land. It's actually a matter of public record. If you give up on us, particularly if you send pestilence against us, I think, God, if you don't mind me saying, it might make you look weak. The other nations are watching, God. You don't want to look weak, do you?

And then Tactic #2: Use their own words against them. Here, Moses brings out the big guns. He goes straight to the language of the contract, straight to law given in Exodus 34: "Now, let me see if I've got this right. Slow to Anger. Abounding in Steadfast Love. Forgiving Iniquities. Frankly, I don't see a lot of room in here for pestilence. Ah, yes, but we do have a caveat, that you will not just go around forgiving any old thing. It says you will – and here I'm quoting – 'visit the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation.' Interesting. So, let me make a counter-proposal: you let us into the promised land as previously scheduled, and maybe we could pick up this whole "judgment" piece at a later date? Say, oh, three or four generations down the road?"

You can see what caught my eye. The things we do to children.

So, why? What kind of God punishes children for the sins of their parents? It's not right, it's not fair. I don't think we really believe it. If we did, what would we say at baptism: see that this child is called a child of God, but, he's also a child of Herb and Alice over there, so, good luck, kid? To punish the children for the sins of the parents – this isn't what we say, and, what's more, in this particular story, it's not what God does. After the negotiations are over, God informs Moses that it will instead be the current generation that will pay their own debt, that will not reach the promised land, forty years of wandering as penitence for their unbelief. The punishment Moses has tried to kick down the road lands squarely at his feet, not at the feet of generations yet to be born.

It's preaching 101: find the problem in the text, find that moment that springs the question you can run with. Friends, it is very tempting to stand here today and tell you that the problem in this text is that God claims to punish children for the sins of their parents, and then we'd play the game of getting God off the hook. I can see the sermon laid out before me. I'd point out that the Old Testament is inconsistent on this very point, that in Deuteronomy God claims precisely the opposite, that we're clearly standing on an issue of some controversy for ancient Israel. I could drown it out with so many revelations of God's grace. I could assure you that the God we worship, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, is not a vengeful and grudge-holding God, and then I could close with a good old-fashioned Hallelujah. But that's not the problem in this text. God's words, yes, but in quotes – in this context, it's Moses who makes the demand, Moses who tries to pass of the debts of his generation onto the generations to come. So the problem in this text is not that God punishes children for the sins of their parents. That's not what God does. It's what we do. It's the thing *we* do to children. In this text, *we* are the problem.

If you will forgive the cliché: what kind of world are we leaving to the next generation? What will be their inheritance? You know the issues. I know you've read the headlines. Children born today will inherit a world teetering on the brink of environmental, economic, and political collapse. This is the part of the sermon where I can just open up the newspaper. Ecosystems are failing: Time magazine reports this week that global carbon is wreaking havoc upon oceanic life in ways far more devastating than we had previously imagined. "If the current trajectory of damages continues," it says, "a new extinction event [is] inevitable." Meanwhile, on NPR, the news is that while scientific consensus on climate change has moved well past the margin of error, the American public is less likely to "believe" it than we were five years ago, as if disbelieving it would somehow make it go away.

Or, for a change of tack, you could read in The Guardian this week that the world's richest people have actually swollen in population since the beginning of the global recession. This group – here anyone with over a bare million dollars in free assets – is also richer than ever, accounting for more than 40 trillion dollars in a world economy currently hoping instead for the noble self-sacrifice of the Greek working class in order to stave off another meltdown, a far likelier bet, it would seem, than one on reasoned congressional discourse about the debt ceiling. It is hard not to imagine these bank accounts fed, however circuitously, off the backs

of the global poor, with the lives of young men and women lost on the battlefield, at the cost of so many silenced dissident voices, with the hopes and dreams of the next generation. I kid you not, as I wrote these lines, a headline popped up on my screen: “Don’t underestimate the possibility of catastrophe.” What kind of an inheritance do we leave?

Obviously, there’s an elephant in the room. We are not all one generation, and I may look as much like a child to some of you as I seem a parent to others. I admit to seeing the part of the world I have inherited with some dose of the young man’s anger, the anger of Ezekiel in exile: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” But the truth is that in every moment we are all, each of us, camped with Moses and the Israelites, lost in the fog of the wilderness, straining to see into the promised land – and we will never be the ones to pay the price for our biggest failures. How, then, will this generation – this gathering, this congregation, this city, this country, this global community – how will this generation reclaim ownership and responsibility for the sins that will otherwise plague our grandchildren and great-grandchildren? We were so outraged to consider that God would pass our sins to the third and fourth generation. From whence will we instead find the collective imagination, creativity, and courage to put *ourselves* in the line of fire, to give our children the inheritance they deserve, an inheritance of goodness and possibility?

There’s a slippery slope here to a kind of fatalism that borders on the farcical. For the savvy TV viewers in the audience, I remind myself too much of Mrs. Lovejoy, the pastor’s wife on *The Simpsons* (pastor’s wife being a social role I know just a bit about). Ms. Lovejoy is not a well-rounded character, but the town can count on her alarmism to punctuate any crisis with the wailing of “Won’t somebody please think of the children.” It’s easier to find ironic distance and throw up our hands. Besides, the problems are too big, and we are so scattered. Environmental degradation is a massive, many-sided problem, the result of centuries of collective ignorance – willful or otherwise – about the consequences of modernity. What is one guy to do? Of course, there’s nothing wrong with cutting up your plastic six-pack holder so as not to kill the sea turtles. Please do – it’s better than the alternative. But at their core the sins we pass on are interconnected global crises that cannot be fixed with a series of “here’s how you can help” after-school specials. We make individual choices the best we can; they’re the only kind we know how to make, but we make them with the haunting fear that there’s only so much that one person can do.

Which is again my question to Moses: why? You’re in a unique position, with the ability to make an individual decision that will affect the collective fate of an entire nation. Frankly, all you have to do is stop talking. Just quote back the part about mercy and forgiveness. Leave off the part about punishing future generations. Easy enough – the Psalmist does exactly that when he quotes the same passage. You were negotiating so well. You have God on the ropes; you’ve already won; ask for your heart’s desire; ask for the moon and the stars. Why put it on the children? Why kick the can down the road? Selfishness? Political cowardice? What, are you in bed with the special interests? Do the judgment lobbyists have you in their pocket? What’s the problem?

Actually, for Moses, there was probably some morbid comfort in reminding God to visit the sins of his generation onto his descendants. In the wilderness, Israel is living day by day – nearly slaughtered at the edge of the Red Sea, nearly starved until the Manna descended. The covenant so freshly made at Sinai seems inadequate to the threats of imminent extinction; for Moses, the promise of God visiting sins upon future generations is a promise that future generations will indeed exist. Listen to the urgency of his negotiation: “If you kill this people all at one time”; Moses is stalling. He’s buying time the only way he knows how – by holding God to a covenant guarantee of survival, a covenant promise, wrapped as it is in a cloak of judgment and vindication. It’s a guarantee that God’s covenantal promise holds, even when Israel’s faithfulness falters, even when God’s temper rises, even with extinction itself on the line. At the end of the day, it’s not a promise about forgiveness or judgment: it’s a promise of presence, of relationship, a promise that God will be with them to as many generations as can be counted.

It’s a promise made to Abraham. It’s a promise ratified at Sinai. But as Christians we embrace it first and foremost as a promise embodied on the cross, in the willing self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. “If you kill this people all at one time” – it’s actually something like a Hebrew idiom. Quite literally it says “if you kill this nation like it was one man.” Like it was just a man, just one guy, one guy who couldn’t possibly make a difference. A coincidence of language, to be sure. But in equal measure a prophecy of the one man whose life and death ensured the inheritance of that promise to each and every coming generation, to the third, to the fourth, to the thousandth: a promise not just of mercy, but of passion, a promise that, try as we might, our sins are finally borne not by our own sons and daughters but rather by God’s own son, *all at one time*, just one guy against the world. Or listen again to the reading from Ephesians: “He destined us for adoption as *his* children through Jesus Christ... he has made known to us the mystery of his will, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth ... this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people.” Our children will inherit a world coming apart at the seams. But they will also inherit the covenant of the grace of God which is from everlasting to everlasting.

In our final moments, I want you to put in your mind’s eye a child, a child you have loved, your own, a family member, a friend. I want you to gaze together into the world this child will inherit, ten, twenty, fifty years, the sins we pay forward, the work we leave undone. Yes, there is propaganda. Yes, there is fear-mongering. But there are also real problems. Real crises. Don’t underestimate the possibility of catastrophe. None of us should in any way be convinced that we can leave to our children a better world than the one we found, not without courage, not without sacrifice, not without imagination of a altogether new caliber. Mrs. Lovejoy is right: somebody does have to think about the children, and it is past time for us to beg each other for a general reckoning of accounts, for the sake of that child, for the sake of their children, to the third, fourth, thousandth generation. But know this as well: the God of the wilderness, the God of the promised land, the God who suffers for us on the cross and triumphs even over the grave: that God has the same child in His mind’s eye. That God sees with a perfect parent’s eyes, with kindness, with mercy, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and bearing for the generations to come an inheritance of grace none of our sins can overcome, “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things, things in heaven and things on earth...” Thus says the Lord: I am with you, always, until the end of the age. These are the things we do to children. Hallelujah.