

The Promises God Kept in Jesus Christ: The Promise of Unconditional Love
II Samuel 7:1-17
John 3:11-21

“But I will not take my steadfast love from him....”

The story that contains God’s promise of unconditional love to David and David’s line forever was the story we considered, just a few cold months ago, on the last Sunday in Advent. In that season, as we prepared our hearts and minds for Christmas, we read God’s promise to David through the lens of Christ’s birth in Luke’s Gospel. The God who refused the confinement of a house built by King David was about to enter the confinement of Mary’s womb and our mortal lives. Of the child about to be born, the angel Gabriel announced: “The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David....He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

How tempted I was to return to that sermon this morning--except that now in the season of Lent, as we prepare our hearts and minds for Holy Week and Easter, we are reading God’s promise to David through the lens of Christ’s death in John’s Gospel. In the Prologue, John tells us of the Word that was in the beginning and was with God and was God, the Word through whom all things were made, became flesh and “dwelt” with us, “pitched his tent” with us, “tabernacled” with us. This is the same God whose dwelling place with God’s people in the wilderness was a portable tent, he is saying; the same God who said to David, “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.”

Yet between God’s refusal of David’s offer to build a house and God pitching a tent with us in Jesus Christ, God settled down in a house build for him by Solomon in Jerusalem. Why God permitted this to happen, God only knows. The cynics say it was the king co-opting God for

political purposes, and there surely is some truth to that still. But once built, the temple and the king became tangible signs of God's promise to be with and for David's line forever. As you might imagine, the differences between God's promise to David in the city and God's promise to Moses in the wilderness are striking. To borrow Robert Jenson's words, "The covenant of the Exodus knew that Israel had once not yet been Israel, and therefore lived by promise; the Davidic covenant was with a people already settled in its land and ways. The tradition of the Exodus remembered that Jahve was a Bedouin-God, a God of movement and change; the royal priesthoods [of the Davidic covenant] always tended to assimilate Jahve to Baal, the Canaanite guarantor of the timelessly repeating agricultural cycles. The Exodus covenant interpreted Israel's life in terms of the desert, and its unpredictabilities and risks; the Davidic covenant tended to interpret Israel's life in terms of civilized security, of the necessity of every established government to glorify the status quo." Yet the Davidic covenant "anchored" Israel's relationship with God in economic and political realities, in the events of human history. The king was to be the bearer of the promise, "a living and responsible incarnation of God's presence among his people." There was only one rub, an unspoken condition: as long as Israel had kings and the temple was standing, the promise was credible.

But when the temple was first destroyed, the monarchy toppled, the land seized and God's people were marched off to Babylon, only the words of the promise remained. In exile, they remembered God's words to David, saying that he would punish the king with a rod such as mortals use, but would not take his steadfast love from him; and they consoled themselves with God's assurance that the house and the kingdom and the throne of David's ancestors shall be made sure, shall be established, forever. They hoped against hope that God would keep God's promise. Therefore when the remnant returned to Jerusalem, even though their own houses had

been destroyed, their first priority was to rebuild God's house, a project that was completed in four years under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Still the people were left to long for a king and to look for the day when God would keep God's promise to David's line. Prophets kept trying to rethink the meaning of the promise of God to David, to explain why the promise had not been fulfilled, until finally the prophets stopped talking. There was nothing plausible left to say.

According to Robert Jenson, after the exile, Israel's hope reached an impasse. Because "all hopes are invested in someone and because the only certain thing about that someone is that he [she] will die," the promise to David and David's heirs "had to face death and had not yet." In general, religion sidesteps death, saying death is the transition from time to timelessness—we die and go to heaven; but Israel could not compromise the promise in this way. If God "is the God of time and of promises, [God is] simply the enemy of death." Having promised that his love for his people would have no end, death had to be defeated, its power over human existence conquered.

How else but for God to die himself? "God so loved the world: God loved the world in this way," John wrote sometime around 90 A.D., twenty years after the second temple had been destroyed by the Romans and sixty years after Jesus' death. By the end of the first century, two communities remained, both claiming to be heirs of God's promise. One community continued the conversation with God by wrestling with the words of Scripture for a blessing; that community lives, even now, in the hope that God will yet send another to establish the house and kingdom and throne of David's line in history. The other community, John's community, believed that God had come to dwell, to tent, to tabernacle with them in Jesus Christ. When Jesus died, it would have been completely in keeping with their history to remember Jesus as one in a line of prophets and kings, all dead, and then to look for the next--except that this community

came to believe that God had kept God's promise--never to take God's steadfast love from them--by raising Jesus from the dead. Remembering how we have said that a promise gives the future as a gift, saying, "Because I will do this, you may expect thus and so," they said: Because God raised Jesus from the dead, therefore we may expect that not even death can take God's steadfast love from us. "Only a promise that has death behind it could be unconditional," Jens says. "Only a promise made about and by one who had already died for the sake of the promise," could promise a love that has no end. (The old wedding vows remind us that we can only promise our future selves to the beloved "'til death do us part." The condition placed on our promises is death—the other's literal death or the other's death-dealing that sends us running for our lives.)

"God *so loved* the world," John wrote. "God loved the world *in this way*: that he gave his only Son." God's covenant with Abraham comes to mind, though had Abraham actually sacrificed his son, the only heir, the covenant would have ended then and there in death. The only way for God to keep God's covenant of unconditional love is for God's only Son to give himself to us in life and in death. God held nothing back. God gave his Son to become flesh and live among us. God gave his Son up to death, that death will no longer have the power to separate us from God. In Christ, God gives himself completely, unconditionally to the creatures God created in love and for love.

Moreover, God so loved *the world*, evoking again the promise to Abraham, through whom all nations would be blessed. John is saying that the promise of unconditional love, first made to David, has become God's promise to the world in God's Son.

Then John goes on to say that God loves us in this way so that none may perish and all may have eternal life. Eternal life in John's Gospel is not something that happens to you when you die. Eternal life is life with God. John is telling us that life with God is being given to the

world now in the presence of the love that knows no end, in Jesus Christ, whom death could not conquer, nor the tomb imprison. Moreover, in him the light of God's love shines on you in such a way that you are seen as wholly yourself, the human being you were destined to be, from the beginning to the end, reflected in him, who is the express image of the God in whose image you were created.

There is, however, something that sounds like a condition placed on the promise, a caveat: that even though God so loved the world, if you do not believe in God's Son, the promise does not hold. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone who believes in him* may not perish but have eternal life. Ninety-eight times the word "believe" appears in John. He even says in the verse that first ended the Gospel, "these are written so that you may come to believe (or continue to believe) that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." But the word is always *pisteuo*, a verb, and not *pistis*, a noun. When John uses the word believe in a sentence, he is not looking for assent to a proposition. He is hoping for the leap of faith that propels the believing to die to the lives we are living as though death has dominion; he is inviting the dying to live, here and now, as those who belong, in life and death, to the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

No doubt John was drawing lines in the sand of his time, between his community and the community that kept the conversation with God's word going while they looked for another. Yet I also think that, in the presence of such wondrous love, John was asking of Jesus' death and resurrection the question we asked in Advent of Jesus' birth: "What good is it to me," Meister Eckhart, the Medieval mystic said, "if this eternal birth of the divine son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within me?" What good is it to me if the death of the divine son took

place, once for all, and does not take place within me? “God did not send the Son in the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Sometimes I wonder how the story would have unfolded had God refused the demand of the people that they be given a king and so become a nation like other nations; sometimes I wonder how the relationship of God to God’s people might have evolved had God continued to move about in a tent and a tabernacle. Sometimes, in extremis, in the wilderness, when believing is more than I can manage, I happen upon another who knows not the Lord Jesus and yet lives as one of the redeemed. Then I believe the God who tented with us, who tabernacled with us in Jesus Christ, still tents incognito in those whose unconditional love, even to the point of death, gives us a glimpse of God’s promise kept in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.