

## Promises, Promises, Promises

Isaiah 55:6-11

Romans 9:4-5

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1:15-22

Luke 1:67-79

It's startling to find the word "promise" hundreds of times over in the English translations of the Hebrew bible. It's startling for one reason: the word "promise" isn't found in the Hebrew language. In biblical Hebrew the verb that the English translators render "promise" is simply the verb **to speak** or the verb **to say**. In ancient Hebrew if someone merely said he would do something his saying it was a promise.

We are far from this attitude today. Today we ask someone if he will do something; he says he will; then we come back, "Do you promise?" Plainly we are asking him to promise he will do what he has said he will just because we can't trust him; we can't trust that his simple, unadorned word is trustworthy.

Our fellow-Christians who are Quakers noted all of this as early as the 1600s. Everyone knows that Quakers have consistently refused to take an oath in court to tell the truth; they will not swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – and this for one reason: Quakers believe that Christians tell the truth at all times and in all situations. Why, then, would they make a special promise to tell the truth in one situation? For 400 years Quaker Christians have said, "To promise to tell the truth in court is to admit that we do not or may not tell the truth out of court; it's to admit that our word can't be trusted day-in and day-out. But our word can be trusted: what we say we perform. Our simple word is our promise."

In ancient Israel someone's word was her promise for one reason: God's word was his promise. What he said, he did. Promise guaranteed performance.

Since *the* characteristic of the living God is that he speaks, we can just as readily say that *the* characteristic of the living God is that he promises; and not only promises, performs. Everywhere in the Hebrew bible God's promise guarantees fulfilment. If the promise is made, performance is sure. Nothing describes God more characteristically than the fact that he is *the* promise-maker and therefore *the* promise-keeper.

I: -- Then we should pay closer attention when we read in the newer testament (Romans 9:4-5) that the promises (of God) belong to Israel. Note the present tense: to Israel belong (there continue to belong, there belong right now) the promises. It isn't suggested that the promises used to belong to Israel but do no longer.

It's important to acknowledge this truth for several reasons, not least because of a remark that was made concerning my ministry in Mississauga. The remark was, "Why doesn't Victor shut up about the Jews? There is no place in Christian worship for his repeated references to the Jews. If Victor thinks so highly of them, why doesn't he move over to the synagogue and join them?" I find it odd that no place is to be given to Yiddishkeit in Christian worship when Christian scripture insists that the promises belong to Israel still. According to Christian scripture (what we call the "New" Testament) Israel continues to have a place in God's economy by God's ordination. Could it ever be appropriate to deny this truth in a service of worship?

My repeated insistence on Israel's ongoing place in the plan and purpose of God doesn't mean for a minute that the Jewish people alone of all the peoples on earth have been spared the Fall. It doesn't mean that they alone have pure hearts while we Gentiles are treacherous. After all it is a Jew, Jeremiah, who insists that the hearts of his own people are "deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt."(Jer. 17:9) Jew and Gentile are alike creatures of the Fall.

It doesn't mean that every last Jewish person is loveable or trustworthy -- just as no one is silly enough to pretend that every last Gentile is loveable or trustworthy.

It doesn't mean that every political move of the modern state of Israel is to be approved. The political moves of the modern state of Israel must be evaluated in accord with the moves of any nation-state.

It doesn't mean that the history of ancient Israel has been whitewashed. The Hebrew prophets were tormented by a spiritual unfaithfulness in Israel that they described as harlotry; the same prophets were angered by a hypocrisy that they spoke of as a stench in the nostrils of God.

But -- and it's a huge "but" -- while God's next-to-last word to Israel (spoken through Hosea) is

“Lo-ammi” (“Not my people”), “Lo-ruchamah” (“Not pitied”), God’s final, irrevocable word to Israel is, “How can I give you up? And because I cannot give you up, I must call you “Ammi” (“My people”), “Ruchamah” (“Pitied”).

Centuries ago Jesus appeared before Pilate. Pilate didn’t want to bother with Jesus, since Pilate knew that adjudicating Jewish squabbles was a no-win matter for him. In a voice dripping with contempt Pilate asked Jesus, “Am I a Jew?” -- meaning, “TGod whole world knows that I’m not one of your miserable people.”

When our daughter Catherine was fourteen (fourteen, not four, and not stupid either) she asked Maureen and me at the dinner table one evening in genuine bewilderment, “Are we Jews?” Maureen and I quickly told Catherine, “No. At least not exactly, but in a sense, yes, inasmuch as all Christians are honorary Jews; all Christians are guests in the house of Israel.”

Let us never forget the words of the apostle: “Until you Gentiles had embraced Jesus Christ in faith you were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.”(Eph. 2:12) Since we have embraced Jesus Christ we now belong to the commonwealth of Israel.

What will happen if we Gentile Christians forget that the promises belong to Israel? What will happen if we forget that we are guests in the house of Israel?

We shall neglect Israel’s book, what we call the older testament (it happens to be 78% of the bible), the first testament; and in neglecting it we shall ruin the Christian faith. Ruin it? Yes, utterly.

**(i)** In the first place we shall forfeit the truth that the universe is God’s creation, created out of his oceanic love, ruled by his sovereign mercy, sustained by his incomprehensible patience and finally accountable to him. We shall forfeit this foundational truth inasmuch as the newer testament doesn’t yield a doctrine of creation.

**(ii)** In the second place we shall fail to understand ourselves as human beings. It is only in Israel’s book that we learn we are made uniquely in God’s image, have been made “response-able” to him and “response-ible” for our life with him and with other humans alike made in his image.

**(iii)** In the third place we shall no longer know who God is. We shall forget that God is *not* identical with his creation or with any part of it. (The biggest confusion at all times is the confusion between God and God's creation.) To say this is to say that God is holy, and apart from the older testament we can't understand what God's holiness means.

Apart from the older testament we can't understand that God is person. Because God is person, according to Israel's book, he is heartbroken like a husband whose wife leaves him for another man; he weeps like a wife whose husband won't come home; he rages at horrors in the world that should find you and me raging too; he grieves over children who would rather be lost than found; he snorts like a labourer or an athlete whose exertion is at its outermost limit; he rejoices like a father whose child is the apple of his eye; he bonds himself to his people like a nursing mother whose breastfeeding brings as much comfort and contentment to her as it brings nourishment to her infant.

When we have ignored -- or worse, disdained -- our place in the commonwealth of Israel what shall we have left of God? Certainly not God as holy and God as person. Then what? an abstract idea? a lifeless principle? a projection from our wish-list?

**(iv)** In the fourth place unless we keep before us our membership in the commonwealth of Israel we shall invariably magnify the wickedness of anti-Semitism, which wickedness the world may politely denounce out of political correctness but secretly always aids and abets. Need I say more?

"To them -- Israelites -- belong (present tense) the promises." I am unashamed to take my stand with the apostle.

**II: --** In taking my stand with the apostle Paul I thereby endorse his conviction that "All the promises of God find their Yes in Christ." (2 Cor. 1:20) Whatever God has promised throughout his centuries-long struggle with Israel; whatever he has promised to Israel, or through Israel to the church; it is all gathered up and fulfilled and crowned in Christ Jesus our Lord. In fact all the promises made to Israel, made through Israel, are promised afresh in Christ and performed in Christ.

“All the promises of God find their Yes in him”, says the apostle.

Because the God who incarnates himself in Jesus of Nazareth is the promise-making (promise-keeping) God, there are scores of promises arising from the earthly ministry of Jesus that we could take to heart this morning and sustain ourselves with until our struggle is over too. There isn't time to probe scores of them; today we shall probe three only.

(i) The first promise is that we are **never unaccompanied**. “I am with you always, to the close of the age”, says our Lord.(Matt. 28:20) He has promised that he will never forsake us. Note: he will never forsake us. This is the promise. The promise isn't that you and I shall never *feel* forsaken. Christ's people often feel forsaken. Think of the sentence Paul writes in his second letter to the congregation in Corinth. He speaks of the affliction that savaged him and others in Asia. He doesn't tell us precisely what the affliction was. He does tell us, however, what the effect of the affliction was on him and his friends: “We were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.”(2 Cor. 1:8-10) How much worse could anyone feel? “We were crushed. We despaired of life itself.” Remember, our Lord has promised never to forsake us; he hasn't promised that we shall never feel forsaken.

It's only fair that we let Paul finish his own sentence: “We felt we had received the sentence of death, *but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. Therefore on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.*”

Our Lord has promised that he will never leave us unaccompanied. Has he kept his promise? How can anyone know whether he has kept his promise? Plainly there can be no proof. It's impossible to prove that Jesus never leaves his people unaccompanied. But lack of proof is no detriment. After all, in the profoundest matters of life there never is proof. I can't prove to anyone that my wife loves me. At the same time, I have never doubted that she loves me ardently. In the profoundest matters of life there never is proof; but there is testimony, witness.

Then what testimony has been borne to our Lord's promise-keeping? We must summon witnesses

and allow them to speak. How many witnesses will it take to convince us? Myself, I always begin with my grandmother. She was poorly educated (the eldest of 15 children), became a servant-girl in England at age 12, and then the wife of a factory-worker in early 1900s Canada. (In other words, she had only pennies.) Ten pregnancies, six live births, four surviving children; kidney removed in 1917; towards the end of her life she had to attend relentlessly to a husband whose limbs were as twisted as a pretzel and who was unable to get out of bed for the last 11 years of his life -- which husband she managed to outlive for a year or two. Perhaps you wish to say that her situation may not have been so very unusual for people of her era. Nonetheless, what was unusual was her quiet testimony concerning the promise kept. "I am with you always; you are never unaccompanied." Proof is impossible in the nature of the case. Her testimony (to me, at least) was so authentic as to be unrejectable. The final stanza of her favourite hymn was fixed in her heart and on her lips:

No tempest can my courage shake,  
 My love from Thee no pain can take,  
 No fear my heart appal.  
 And where I cannot see I'll trust  
 For then I know Thou surely must  
 Be still my all in all.

In the latter part of the 1800s and in the early part of the 1900s Nathanael Burwash was a giant in Canadian Methodism. Scholar, university professor, churchman, preacher, Burwash was instrumental in moving Victoria College from Cobourg to the University of Toronto with all that Canada's pre-eminent university could do for Victoria and Victoria for it. In addition Burwash was a major architect of the uniting churches of 1925. In one terrible week in 1889 he and his wife lost four children to diphtheria. What did Burwash do? Curse God? Rage that God was merely a teaser and tormentor? Conclude that there was no more substance or truth to faith than to a child's imaginary playmate? Just the opposite. His consistent testimony was that his Lord's promise was kept. Christ's people are **never unaccompanied**.

**(ii) Never unilluminated** is the second promise we shall examine this morning. "I am the light of the

world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”(John 8:12) He has promised never to leave us in the dark.

But sometimes we *feel* we are in the dark. What’s more, we are annoyed at people who claim never to be confused or perplexed or stymied or ignorant; we are annoyed at people who never seem to recognize life’s complexity.

Then what does our Lord mean when he promises never to leave us unilluminated? He means that he will always provide us with enough light to take the next step; *only* the next step, to be sure, but *at least* the next step. He hasn’t promised to give us so much light as to let us see where we shall be and what we shall be about 45 years hence, but certainly enough light for the next step so that the only issue facing you and me is **obedience**. If we lacked all light we could readily excuse our sin; but as long as we have enough light for one step, the next step, then the issue isn’t light; the issue is obedience. To obey is always to find enough light for the next step again, and then for the next step after that. Not to obey, of course, is to find ourselves in a darkness that only grows darker.

We must be sure to note that the promise isn’t that no one ever walks in darkness (many people, tragically, continue to walk in darkness); the promise is that whoever follows Jesus; *this* person won’t walk in darkness, for Christ is light.

**(iii)** Never unaccompanied, never unilluminated, **never neglected**. Says our Lord, “If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him.”(Matt. 7:7-11//Luke 11:9-13) Actually, there is a preface to the promise. “Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For nobody asks or seeks or knocks in vain. Is your heavenly Father a torturer? Depraved as you are you wouldn’t treat your child like that. How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.”

What are the “good things”? “Goodies”? Trinkets and toys? Luke’s version of Christ’s promise

helps us here: “How much more will your Father *give the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him.”

The Holy Spirit is God himself in his utmost immediacy, intimacy, intensity. He himself is the gift; he himself in his immediacy, intimacy, intensity. All who ask, seek, knock find themselves flooded by the Spirit.

Is the promise kept? Proof is impossible. Testimony alone matters, as testimony alone pertains to the profoundest aspects of life.

With whose testimony do we begin? Paul says, “I am rock-ribbed certain that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Peter says, “His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” Julian of Norwich (a 14th century woman), “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Martin Luther, when asked where he would be if everything he had agonized over and labored for were overturned, replied, “I should be then where I am now; in the hands of God.” When a prison guard taunted Nicholas Ridley, the most brilliant of the English Reformers, on the eve of Ridley’s execution, “Do know what’s going to happen to you tomorrow, Mr. Ridley?”, Ridley replied, “Yes, I know what’s going to happen to me tomorrow; tomorrow I marry. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” The prophet Jeremiah has testified, “God’s faithfulness is great; his steadfast love never ceases; his mercies never come to an end.”

There is no point in piling up testimonies *ad infinitum*. Once we have heard them, all that remains for us is to them to heart. Which is to say, all that remains for us is to entrust ourselves to him who is Israel’s greater son. Because he is a son of Israel, *the Son*, and speaks Hebrew, he doesn’t have to say “I promise” in order to promise. All he needs do is speak. His word is his promise, his promise kept.

For all the promises of God find their Yes in Christ Jesus our Lord.