

## *Promises*

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Isaiah 2:1-5

*“In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains...”*

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

### *Movement 1 – Cracks in the Foundation*

We live in a mess. We may not always realize it, we may not always face it, but when you step back, when you take the long view, you may find yourself muttering, “what a mess.” You mutter it in the same way when you walked in a room, walked into your yard, or got into your car and found a mess. The children decided to take out every last piece of Tupperware, the squirrels decided to dig holes in every last inch of your yard and the dog has dug up all of your flowers, and the person you loaned your car to decided to eat cheese curls and has left yellow cheese fingerprints all over the dash and the steering wheel. You go into the room, the yard, or the car and mutter to yourself, “what a mess.”

Step back, look at the world and you will find yourself saying a very similar thing. We live in a messy world, wars, pestilence, famine, greed, ill-regard for others are all a part of the mess that we live in. In our country there are millions of people who are without health care, who will not see a doctor for regular visits, but only go to the emergency room when it is necessary, and health care cost are rising and rising, and we find ourselves saying, “what a mess.” We live in a world where the issue of immigration fluctuates between getting rid of everyone, to letting everyone in, to building walls and still keeping in those who have already been here and we find ourselves saying, “what a mess.” We live in a world where millions of people are murdered and displaced, where genocide and ethnic cleansing occurs, and leaders from other countries just stand by making feeble cries hoping that the bloodshed will end, but doing nothing more and we find ourselves saying, “what a mess.” We live in a world that is deteriorating ecologically, and yet our lifestyles are not adjusting to slow down the process. It is a world where jobs could be lost if belts are environmentally tightened, where we are often forced to choose between the welfare of our neighbor and the welfare of the environment and we find ourselves saying, “what a mess.” I could go on and on and share more and more of the mess of the world. We live in a messy, messy world. It is a veritable “Chinatown” or “Sin City” from the movies of those respective titles. The world is a mess.

As we near the primaries for both parties we hear more and more from all of the candidates how the world is a mess. The political spin is to paint a broken picture of the world and then to lure the potential voter to a particular candidate’s position and solutions. The pictures which the politicians paint are bleak, and while some may be overstated, they still point to a truth; the world is a mess. Countries are at odds with other countries, leaders are selfish and keep resources for themselves and their entourage, and millions of people are dying for lack of goods and care. The distribution of goods is anything but egalitarian, and we assume that things will only get worse and worse. The world is a mess.

Perhaps you find some solace in knowing that this is not new. Perhaps you find some hope in knowing that for centuries the world, at the hand of humanity, has been a mess. When Isaiah first spoke his prophecies he spoke to a society that felt a sense of fear and dread. Judah was a small country surrounded by Syria and Assyria on either side, and both were breathing down each other's neck. The Israelites were stuck in-between, a neglected, rejected country trying to decide which country to align itself with; it was a mess. The leaders were considering placing more trust in political powers, in one of the great nations than in the Lord. Temple worship was lost, the care for the people was lost, and the treat of military domination was looming. Isaiah came to the king, to the aristocracy, to the leaders of Judah who saw a world with cracks and brokenness and claimed that the world was a mess.

We stand with the Israelites surveying the world and surveying our own lives and seeing a mess. We all have a mess in our lives. It seems that we are always fighting with our children, it seems like our parents can't help but criticize us, it feels like you are always speaking past your spouse and never to your spouse; it feels like your life is a mess. Your health is anything but good, and threatens to worsen, your anxiety only increases and you cannot see any place where it will decrease; your life is a mess. You try to pray, you try to read scripture, you try to keep yourself together and not fall to anger, to greed, to a critical nature but you slip again and again; your life is a mess. It feels as if the foundation is cracked. It feels as if the very rock you are standing upon is breaking and there is nothing you can do. In so many churches you find a devotion to the cross, a love for Christ, but again and again people are lured towards the mundane aspects of ministry. Again and again people argue over the color of the carpet, the type of church van to buy, or length of the worship service. No matter how hard individuals try, or even the church collective tries it seems that churches are stuck in this rut. Churches are in a mess.

The existentialist theologian Paul Tillich described despair as that moment when you face your finitude and realize that there is a limit to what you can do. You face your mess and do not see any hope of cleaning it up and we begin to find ourselves in despair. Life, the world, everything is a mess, looming and threatening us. We are in a mess.

### *Movement 2 – Can We Trust the Promises?*

We look for promises to give us hope. We look for something to hold onto, something to grasp and fix the cracks in our foundation. We look to put some kind of band-aid over our wounds, our fissures and cracks hoping that things will get better. It is more than words of assurance, more than words of effort, but something solid that we can stand upon. We look for a promise.

A promise is that severe, that intense assurance that things will change. It is a verbal contract that has a binding nature and calls for our trust. When confronting the addict with his or her darkness, when giving the addict the ultimatum to change or lose all that he may have what is the assurance that is offered but a promise. The desperate eyes speak to the sincerity and those almost sacred words, "I promise," binding the individuals to change. In desperate times, in the face of despair, we look for a promise, because the promise is a severe agreement, a binding word that calls someone to a level of attention that is not easily broken. We look for promises.

As politicians stump from town to town, as they paint a bleak picture of the country, or of their opponents they then respond with a promise. A promise to raise taxes or lower them, a promise to increase a universal healthcare or privatize healthcare, or a promise to increase our security while protecting our freedom are offered to attract us to the different politicians and different platforms. The promise is the binding oath that we are given from a politician assuring us that the mess of the world will be cleaned up in a particular way.

The Israelites experienced king after king who promised to lead in a different way. The story of Judah and Israel is a story of regime change to regime change, all carrying their own approach, their own embrace to bring the peace and prosperity that they felt they needed. They promised the Lord they would be faithful, they promised their people that things would change, and they promised their friends that they would be taken care of.

The promise is the hope that things will change. The promise is the assurance that things will get better. Our pastors promise that they will not allow a church to become mired in the mundane. Our children promise to listen. Our spouse promises to be more attentive. Leaders of countries promise to work towards peace and stay their hand from violence. We look for the promise, the severe, binding contract to offer us some hope.

It is appropriate, in the face of the mess we are in to look for promises of change. Can we settle for someone to say, "I'll try?" Can we settle for someone to say, I will give an effort to change, to make things right? Can we settle for someone to half-heartedly address the wounds in our foundations, the wounds in our lives and say, I'll do what I can? Those who die of hunger every day cannot rest on a half-hearted attempt. Those who are surrounded by the sounds of gunfire and bombs cannot wait for someone to get around to changing things. Those who have to choose which medications to use because they cannot afford all that they need cannot wait for someone to see what they can do. We need to know that things will change. We need to know that things will get better. The promise is what is looked for and the promise is what is desired.

So many of our families need to change. So many of our churches need to change. So many of our lives need to change and we cannot take anything less than a promise. The cracks are too big, and gauze of assurance will not suffice. We need the promise that things will get better, that things will change.

### *Movement 3 – Broken Promises*

But the promises often break. Promises are often broken. Think again of the addict. Think again of the addict who looked his or her spouse in the eyes and said, "I promise I'll change." How many times is that promise broken? In the television satire *Desperate Housewives* Mike the plumber promised Susan that he would not take pain medicine to which he was addicted. He showed the severity of his promise, the intensity of his promise by throwing his pills down the sink drain. Yet later that night we find Mike opening up the drain to retrieve the pills. His promise was broken.

Promises are broken. How many politicians have made promises and then have gone in a completely different direction? Perhaps it would be easier to ask how many politicians have kept their campaign promises. This is a reality that we all live with, that we all know, and yet we still take a chance and trust the politician. Or, with a hint of

skepticism we embrace a politician, promises and all, knowing full well that the probability that the promises will be kept is slim to none.

Yet what choice do we have? The cracks in our foundation are too large for placid banalities, and we demand promises of change and action knowing that the promises will be easily broken. Machiavelli felt that leaders should be expected to break their promises stating, “a prince never lacks legitimate reason to break his promise.” It was a necessary part of good and true leadership to break promises for the good of the leader, because, as Machiavelli felt, leaders should not be held to promises. Currently there are talks in Annapolis concerning Middle East Peace which will end with one kind of promise or another, but the conventional wisdom states that there is a high probability neither party will keep its word. Yet the talks are held regardless for the sake of doing something even while nothing is expected.

The Israelites found themselves with king after king looking for some kind of hope, some kind of leadership; for a promise of a better future. Yet they expected the king to think of himself, to protect himself and his entourage. The promise to be true to the Lord was broken.

We are put in a hopeless situation, asking for the drastic while expecting the banal. Promises are broken, the cracks in our foundation, in our world increases, and we are left holding broken pieces of hope in our hands.

Where do we turn for a promise to stand upon? Where do we turn for a hope that will change our life? Where do we look for a promise that things will indeed improve, that life will change, that the world will change? Where do we look for the promise that does not crack, that does not break, but will always sustain and lift us up? Where do we look for the solid promises?

#### *Movement 4 – The Promises of the Lord*

Turn to the promises of the Lord. Turn to the promise that we can trust, that we can relay upon. Turn to the promise of the Lord.

Think of that moment when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. It was a moment when they had to trust God. The sea was parted before them, threatening them on either side. Behind them Pharaoh and the rest of the Egyptians were closing fast, threatening to kill, capture, and bring the Israelites back to slavery. To stay was certain death and destruction. To go into the Red Sea was to go into a place of unknowing, to cross into the wilderness where there is a real threat of death of destruction, but also unknowing. Yet through Moses, God was calling them to trust that the one who was with Jacob, the one who led Abraham into a new land, the one who stayed with Joseph through all of his trials was promising them that they would be lead to a new land of hope and glory. Again and again Pharaoh promised that he would let the Israelites go and than broke his promise; could the people trust the promise of the Lord? Could they take that step into the unknown, the unsafe and trust that God would be with them, lead them and care for them? Could they trust in the Lord?

Isaiah is speaking to the kings, kings facing political danger, military danger, and economic danger. Isaiah is speaking to kings who see danger behind them, danger before them, and can only see a wilderness in their future to trust in the Lord. They have trusted in the past, can they trust now, and find their hope in the Lord?

We are standing on a cracked foundation. We are surrounded with uncertainty in our lives, with our families, with our friends, with our health, and in many other aspects of our lives. We are looking into a future that seems to be a wilderness of unknowing, and Isaiah is calling us to trust in the Lord. We ask for promises, but none of them keep. We ask for assurance, but no one can offer an assurance that can seal the cracks, that can offer us the foundation which we can truly stand upon. Isaiah calls us to trust in the Lord. Can we trust in the Lord? The promise of the Lord offers to bind our hope to a possibility to a reality. Can we trust in the Lord? The word of the Lord, the word that is spoken through Isaiah that comes out of Zion, out of the holy place is a light that calls us, that guides us and offers us the surety we so desperately desire. Can we trust in the Lord?

This is what I am asking, what I am challenging you to consider and to embrace in this Advent season. I am challenging you to put your trust in the Lord. Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time of waiting for that great Christmas morning. Often it turns into a time of celebrating Christmas before it even happens (hence the Christmas parties). Instead of blindly accepting the story of Christmas, instead of blindly accepting and embracing the well-worn story, ask yourself; will the promise of Christ's return occur? Can I trust the Lord? Can I trust Christ who said he will someday return as he promised? Can I trust Christ? After all, we have been waiting for two thousand years. We have been waiting so long that the story of the baby is more endearing than the story of a return. We know that Christ was born and so we can celebrate his birth, but Christ has not returned. The promise has not yet been fulfilled. Can we trust the Lord?

#### *Movement 5 – The Shalom Promise*

Here is a taste of the promise that is offered. Isaiah gives a taste of what we look towards. It is a promise of peace and hope. It is a promise of unity and prosperity. It is a promise of a world that is whole and is blessed. This is the promise of the Lord.

When the Pilgrims came to America they were looking for a new land, and a new way to worship their Lord. On the Mayflower, William Bradford preached a sermon in which he referred to America as a "New Jerusalem," a land of religious prosperity, of devotion to God. It was a new land that promised so much which the Pilgrims were looking for. William Penn saw the new land as a place where religious freedom could be afforded to all people. This was a new land with hope and promise.

Isaiah is speaking of a new land. Isaiah is claiming that there will be a time when all people will go to the mountain of the Lord, when devotion to God will be the primary focus of the peoples. Isaiah is speaking of a time when the instruction of the Lord, when the word of the Lord will be on the lips of the people from all nations. Isaiah is speaking of a time when the disputes between nations, between Assyria and Syria, between Lebanon, Syria and Israel, between Iran and America, between Russia and Chechnya, between Ethiopia and Eritrea will be resolved through the actions of the Lord. Isaiah is speaking of a time when the instruments of war will be used for the sake of economic gain through agriculture. A time when swords and spears, when tanks and cruisers, when guns and knives will no longer be needed. Instead will grow a need for threshers and sickles, for harvesters and bailers. Instead will grow a need for planting and sowing. Isaiah is speaking of a time of peace and productivity. Wars will end, and as it is sung in the musical RENT, the opposite of war is not peace, but creation. We will be in a time of creation.

This is the new land; this is the new promise of the Lord. It is a time of shalom. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes about shalom as a right relationship with God, with others and with creation. This means it will be a time when the anger you may feel with your neighbor will be abated. It is a time when the distance you feel with your spouse will be decreased. It is a time when the difficulties with your children will be smoothed. It will be a time with your unrest with yourself, with your health will be brought to an equality of health. It will be a time when we will not longer find ourselves in conflict with the earth, but in a relationship with the earth. It will be not just a time of peace, but a time of shalom, of harmony and balance in relationships and in all things. This is the promise of Isaiah.

This is the kingdom that will be hearkened with the return of Christ. This is the new time that will come to reality with the return of our Lord. This is the promise that we are given, that we are called to trust and to rest upon. Can you trust in this promise? Can you stand on this hope? Can you trust in the Lord?

#### *Movement 6 – Coda – Waiting for the Promises*

It is a promise that we await to come. It is a promise that we have to hold onto, that we are called to embrace. It is a promise that we await to become a reality in our lives.

What is the purpose of the time of Advent? Is it to trim the tree and buy the presents? Is it just a time of carols and Christmas sweaters? Is it a time to just wait for birth of Christ? Yes, but more. Think of the woman who no longer finds hope in this time of year because her husband died on Christmas. Think of the man who was laid off last year and is still struggling to find work. Think of those who are struggling in the mess, think of how we are struggling in the mess. What hope do we have to offer if all that we do is wrap presents and coo at the thoughts of a newborn baby? We offer the hope of the promise found in Isaiah. We offer and we look to the hope of a new time, of a new day, and a new creation. We offer the hope that one day things will be made right. It is a hope and a promise. In Advent we celebrate the promise; we name and articulate the promise as we wait for the coming of our Lord. We hear the hope that things will get better, that some day the mess will be cleaned up. We live into the hope that God has not left us, but has promised us a new land where we all will be redeemed. The scholar Richard Gaillardetz describes Advent as “a confrontation between our faith and a culture [which is] often tone deaf to the values of Advent.” (Commonweal, Dec. 4, 1998). The values of Advent are found in the promises that began with the birth of Christ and that will be fulfilled with the return of Christ. It is a value of an optimism placed on the actions of the Lord. We are waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.

In the next couple of weeks we will dive deeper and deeper into the promises of the Lord as they are shared by Isaiah. In the next couple of weeks we will hear more and more and be challenged to embrace more and more the promises that are offered. Today, start with taking that leap of faith, by suspending your doubt and embracing the promises. Say ‘yes’ to the promise of the Lord. Trust in the Lord that things will change, that the foundation will be made whole on the cornerstone of Christ. Can you trust the Lord? Can you trust the promise of the Lord? Embrace the promises and say yes to the hope, to the glory and to the life that is promised to come.

AMEN