

Draw Near and Experience God's Promise *Luke 13:31-35*

INTRODUCTION

Promises are serious matters, so important are they that throughout the course of our lives we often take serious steps to demonstrate how serious we really are.

- There was a time in society that a simple handshake was all that was needed.
- A person's word was considered legally binding.
- Now it is far more likely that your promises end up notarized and legalized in terminology that is so complex you aren't sure exactly what you promised.

As kids ...

- We would "pinky swear." And if it was really important we would seal it by touching our thumbs while keeping our pinkies interlocked.
- But the really serious stuff required poetry to solemnify:

Cross my heart, hope to die,
Stick a needle in my eye.

Sincere though we were, all pale in comparison to the lengths God went to assure us He would keep the promise He made for His people, as described in today's Old Testament reading (Genesis 15).

The ritual described in Genesis 15 was known in that day as "cutting a covenant." The persons making the covenant would sacrifice several animals and divide the bodies, placing the two halves opposite each other on the ground with a path in between. Then the parties would walk between the pieces of the sacrifices declaring that, if they failed to keep their word, they deserved the same fate as the animals.

In the pages of Scripture God creates multiple covenants (or promises) with His people. Each is different, but each ultimately points toward the cross. It is in the cross of Jesus that God's promises are fulfilled.

Let me remind you that during this season of Lent we are responding to the invitation of God to DRAW NEAR to the cross of Christ. Our theme verse is James 4:8:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8)

Throughout these forty days – continuing on until Easter Sunday on April 17 -- we will journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward His death, burial and resurrection, and as we do, we will repeatedly hear the invitation to DRAW NEAR clearly and we will strive to respond to it positively.

These Lectionary passages today teach us that as we DRAW NEAR to the cross we will EXPERIENCE GOD'S PROMISE.

Let me share three R's:

#1: REQUIREMENT

Usually, in covenants like we see in Genesis 15, BOTH parties would be expected to walk between the animal halves. Promises are like tangoes: it takes two. Nobody pinky swears with themselves!

Can you imagine a wedding ceremony in which only one person made any promises? Picture this if you can:

- June 28, 1980. Van Buren United Methodist Church.
- Pastor Seilhamer guides a beautiful bride named Karen Bryant through the traditional wedding vows: for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health...
- And then he turns to me. "Tom, repeat after me ..."
- What would have happened if I would have said "I don't need to do that?"

That's not the way it works. A promise takes two!

But in this Old Testament story only God made a promise. Abram never did. We read:

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram ... (Genesis 15:17-18)

Smoke and fire were evidence of God's presence there in that moment. Those same images are what guided the children of Israel on their journey through the wilderness for those 40 years.

But we never read that Abram did the same thing. He chased a few birds away from the carcasses, but otherwise he sat still and watched and listened. Abram made no promises. He did do one thing, however. We read about it in verse 6:

Abram believed the Lord, and (God) credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

Abram simply believed. And that was enough. Both Abram and God knew that Abram was a flawed creature. They knew he could not keep any kind of covenant. So God never required Abram to make a promise he could not keep.

As we DRAW NEAR to the cross, one of the uncomfortable realities is that we come face to face with our own inability to keep any promise we make to God. Like Abram, we are flawed creatures. So like Abram, God simply asks us to believe.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ... (John 1:12)

#2: RESOLVE

In last week's sermon I mentioned how the devil was present in every moment of the ministry of Jesus. You can see him in every story. Today's Gospel text (Luke 13:31-35) is a perfect example of that. Look at verse 31:

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." (Luke 13:31)

This is a clear lie, meant to scare Jesus, to get him to stop what he was doing. It really wasn't Herod's style to warn anyone before taking action against them. He certainly didn't do that when he had John the Baptist arrested and beheaded. Plus if Herod was out to get Jesus, the Pharisees would not have warned him. They were constantly looking for a way to get rid of Jesus. What better way than to let Herod handle it?

But it didn't work. Jesus didn't run. In fact, his response to the scare tactic was rather defiant:

You tell that fox that I have no time for him right now. Today and tomorrow I'm busy clearing out the demons and healing the sick; the third day I will be wrapping things up. (Luke 13:32, The Message)

Nothing against foxes, but "fox" was a derogatory term for the Jews. If you were called a fox, they were calling you a "worthless and insignificant person." That would have made Herod mad!

Do you remember what Jesus said when he was 12 years old? Remember ... his parents found him in the temple debating theology with the teacher of the law when he was supposed to be with them in the caravan travelling back home to Nazareth? When they finally found him, his mother told him they were worried. His response:

Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business? (Luke 2:49)

From a very early age Jesus knew he had a mission to fulfill. God had made a promise, and Jesus knew that he was the fulfillment of that promise. No matter the threats – real or imagined – Jesus was resolved to do what God had sent him to do.

I came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

As you DRAW NEAR to the cross, you see that promise of God fulfilled.

#3: REMORSE

There are two times when the Gospels tell us that Jesus wept. One is in John 11; the other in Luke 19. Here Luke doesn't talk about tears, but he does convey the deep sadness of Jesus.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (Luke 13:34)

God through Jesus does the most loving thing possible, and yet time after time people choose not to respond. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says:

Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

That fact breaks the heart of God. He created us, and He wants a restored relationship with every one of us.

(God) is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

From time to time people will ask, "How can a God of love send people to hell?" And the answer is obvious.

He never has, and He never will.

He wants all to come to repentance. The way is clear and the choice is always ours.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and **you were not willing**. (Luke 13:34)

DRAW NEAR, He says, and you will see that in the cross I have fulfilled what I promised. Because Jesus died, you can live!

APPLICATION

In his book, *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington tells about meeting an ex-slave from Virginia who exemplified the kind of sacrifice that is sometimes involved in keeping promises. This man had entered into a contract with his master whereby he would be allowed to purchase freedom for himself by paying so much for so many years to his master. And, while he was earning the money to pay for himself, his master released him from service on his plantation, so that he would be able to labor wherever and for whomever he could earn the most money.

Well, the slave went north to Ohio because the wages were better there. But each year, he would return to his master's plantation to present that year's payment to his

master. After a few years, the Nation was embroiled in the Civil War, and President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation which ended slavery and brought freedom to all the slaves, including this man. But, he still owed his master three hundred dollars.

Now, think about this for a minute. This former slave was free. He didn't have to pay his former master the final three hundred dollars to purchase his freedom—he had already been made free by the Emancipation Proclamation. But he had made a promise. And he was a man of his word. And so he walked from Ohio back to Virginia and presented his former master with the full amount he had promised him, down to the last dollar.

He took his promise seriously.

And so does God. He has promised us that if

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8)

And we can believe beyond the shadow of a doubt:

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:24)

Amen.