

Making Good on the Promise

Isaiah 43: 1-7 Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

We like to think that we're pretty good at keeping our promises. But we can easily recall the occasions in the past when we've failed. Maybe we aren't as good at keeping our word as we thought.

Regardless of the reason why people break promises, it is undeniable that promises frequently get broken. We've all had it happen to us, and we've all done it a time or two—or more—ourselves.

When we are promising something, we are immediately admitting that it isn't something easy, simple, or commonplace. You wouldn't have needed to make a promise if it wasn't. The promise is designed to assure the other party that you will fulfill your commitment.

With a new year, we may make promises to ourselves, new year resolutions. Because we make them to ourselves, they tend to be remarkably easy to break. The only one who gets harmed by breaking the promise is the same one who made the promise. No real consequence in that case.

When you make a promise to a bank or finance company or mortgage company or loan shark, they make you sign a promissory note that you will indeed pay it back, with interest, and agree to suffer the consequences of anything isn't paid back according to the terms of the promise. Those folks are serious; they want their money back and all the benefits that go with it.

God makes promises, too. The biblical record is strewn with God making promises. God keeps God's promises; it's the people with whom God makes those promises who have major difficulties keeping up their end of the bargain.

Let's consider the prophet Isaiah's words. Prior to this, Isaiah has been condemning Israel for its blindness and deafness toward the will of God, its faithlessness and unrighteousness. God is recapping the punishment, making sure that Israel understands that it was God's own will that brought about Israel's punishment.

God doesn't want them to have any misunderstandings about this. Don't think that it was bad strategy by the generals, or the superiority of the enemy army, or that the enemy's gods were stronger, or that their chariots were heavily armored. God wants them to know that none of that mattered. None of it. They were devastated **because God authored it**. God wants them to know where their punishment came from. If they understand that, then they will know where their blessing and salvation comes from. They must know that their blessing and salvation is not from great generals, big armies, better gods, or awesome chariots, something our nation ought to remember.

In our reading, we get the nice part of this equation, starting with the transitional words, “But now, this” Here God reminds them that they exist because God formed and created them. God affirms the parent’s role saying, *I have called you by name; you are mine*. This is not in a sense of ownership *per se*, but rather this people are God’s own as God’s precious creation, like children to a father.

Recalling their history together, God offers assurance for the future, promising God will be with them, regardless of whatever dire perils they should face:

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

God continues. To redeem them from their just punishment, God will ransom Egypt and other distant lands. How does God do this? God owns them, too. God wants his people to know that God is sovereign over all, even great empires. As God is in command of Israel’s destiny, so God is in command of the destiny of empires as well.

God shows the value of his covenant people to him by saying that the great riches and power of the upper and lower Nile of the Egyptian kingdom would be cashed in simply to bail out Israel, a tiny spec of a nation in the crossroads of the Middle East. God will pay paid dearly in order to grace them once again. That is the level of God’s love for God’s people. That is also the basis for this ongoing promise by God; it is a promise rooted in love, like a bride and groom in long marriage, through thick and thin, with love remaining the cornerstone which cannot be moved.

God explains: *[For] you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you*. This matter of a Father’s love is what motivates God, the love for his children, represented by Israel.

By the end of the passage, God makes clear on whose behalf God is acting so passionately:

*Bring my **sons** from far away
and my **daughters** from the end of the earth —
everyone who is **called by my name**,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.*

God acts with generosity, graciously, passionately working to restore the relationship with his children. God acts in love. God will not forget or neglect his children, even though they pass amid the fury of the world’s scorn and violence.

In the reading from Luke, we hear about the baptism of Jesus *after* John has explained how he is not the Messiah from God. In the passage from Luke, John's ministry of baptism is described (as in all the gospels) as pointing toward Jesus, and directing attention **away** from any thought that John was the Promised One from God. This is in all of the gospels: John is identified as the forerunner, but not as the Promised One from God.

The important aspect to remember is the act of baptism. For John the Baptist, that means a passage through the waters. John has been administering baptism as an act for people to repent of their sinfulness and unrighteousness, and get preserved in their baptism. In their restored status before God, they await the Promised One who brings the end of the age.

John describes the Promised One whose brings a baptism of Holy Spirit and fire, imagery connected to Pentecost and to judgment. John wants the faithful – those who **truly** repent of their sinfulness – to be on the right side of divine judgment when it comes. Passing through the waters in baptism sets the faithful in good relationship to God, uniting them to God and God's purpose, and placing them within the family of God's loving care. To gain this, they must genuinely repent of their sins and pass through the waters to their new life status.

This creates a very sticky problem. The typical person coming to John the Baptist had to repent of their sinfulness, and yes, everyone was sinful in John's terms. What do you think happens when Jesus comes along? Does Jesus tell John the Baptist, "Oh, I'm sinless"? Judging from the character of John the Baptist that we can discern, I don't think Jesus is going to get baptized if he says that.

The notion of sinless Jesus is a later theological construction. Although it may have been seen as an issue rather early. Mark and Luke both state rather matter-of-factly that Jesus was baptized and then there was the voice from heaven. In Matthew, there is an awkward exchange with John saying that he should be baptized by Jesus – why? we don't know; maybe the halo gave it away – and Jesus replying, 'Let it be so for now.' In John's gospel, there is no mention of Jesus *even being baptized by John*. We have John repeatedly carrying on about how awesome Jesus is, but nowhere does Jesus actually get baptized, much less by John. The sinless Jesus theology may have already posed some problems before the last gospel was written, but the faithful were also covering it up already and diverting from or not mentioning the issue.

In Luke, Jesus is baptized, just one among a group of believers who were being baptized. Jesus was no different, that is, until the Spirit of God descended on Jesus *in bodily form like a dove* (not that it **was** a dove, but rather **like** a dove gently landing on something). As if that wasn't enough, we have a voice from heaven: *You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*

Jesus gets baptized, the ritual to awaken and enliven the new creation of God's covenant love for the baptized. Jesus emerges to hear the heavenly declaration that he belongs to God, being Son to the Father. We can certainly say that Jesus' baptism was a

major event that contributed to his self-awareness of having a special purpose and special mission to perform in his life. That mission and purpose was bound up in the ancient promise to reconcile the broken promise occurring in the Garden of Eden, to return heaven to earth, God to humanity, the Kingdom triumphant over the worldly powers of sin, injustice, greed, violence, and death.

Here again, God has done the inexplicable. For a Son, God has this nobody from Nazareth (or nowhere) who has been baptized as a member of a minor sect within a small religion. There is absolutely nothing noteworthy about this individual, yet this is the Promised One whom the God of creation calls Son. There is no royalty, no wealth, no reputation, no notoriety of any kind. He's just some guy in the baptism line, *and* he's the Promised One, the Son of God. It's the natural outcome of the humble origins of this fellow in the birth narrative we heard at Advent and Christmas, only his lot in life hasn't materially gotten any better.

If we can discern a pattern, it is that God doesn't care who you are, how important you are, how big your problems are or aren't, how successful you are, how faithful you are, how righteous you are, or how good looking you are. This wacky, crazy God thinks his people are precious and worthy of his gracious love. And that's us, God's people.

We also have two stories that remind us that God promises and God delivers. God makes covenants that get kept, unlike the way we fail to hold up our end of the deal.

In Isaiah, God's faithfulness to God's promise comes amid the trials of exile and occupation by a foreign power. Despite their sinfulness, and the clear testimony as to who authored their punishment, God's love abides above and beyond what God's people have done.

In Jesus, the ancient promise of reconciling heaven and earth and restoring God's way over all creation through the Kingdom comes to fulfillment. Despite the broken nature of humanity's covenant history, Jesus comes to show the way to the peace, love, and new life of God's way, of God's Kingdom. God does not forget. God does not fail.

Who knows what this year will bring? Yes, turbulence may well rock your life's boat, pushing your faith in challenging new directions. In such times, God draws the blessed and faithful people of his covenant closer, giving them a new vision, making them a new creation. The process may not be too pleasant, but we enter those troubled seasons knowing God's promise to be with us, and to make us new through it all.