

Sunday, June 14, 2020
“Promises Kept – and Forgotten”

Exodus 19:1-8
Matthew 9:35-38

By Rev. Chris Keating, pastor
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Someone asked me the other day what I missed most about not having worship in person. There are so many things to pick: I thought about the movement of people entering church, greeting friends, and welcoming guests. I thought about the anticipation that builds as Harry begins the prelude, our announcements, and the acolytes lighting candles. I thought about the music, the hymns we sing, the joy we share. I thought of the mixture of joy and tears that we share. It’s all folded together and then somehow, it happens – it really happens.

But most of all, I thought about the promises we make together.

That is what I miss the most.

I miss the promises we make following our readings from scripture. “This is the Word of the Lord!” the worship leader says. Together, we respond with the enthusiastic affirmation of that promise by saying, “Thanks be to God.” I miss that today. I miss that energetic endorsement of what God has spoken to us. God says to us, “Here are the promises I am making to you!” And we reply: “We know!” Suddenly the loads we are carrying shift a bit. The promise of God awakens new life and new hope. It is the assurance of that promise, revealed to us in Jesus, that gathers us today.

Something similar happens in the Exodus story. God’s people have arrived. They have survived the rough and tumble journey through the wilderness and are now encamped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God has been at work fashioning them into a people, carrying them like a mother eagle protects her young. And so, the people of God respond, “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

That is the promise of a God who shows up in all times and sorts of places: in lonely wildernesses, in crowded cities, in homes, in protests, in times of calm and in times of unrest.

One of our strengths as a congregation has been our ongoing ability to witness to the promises God has made. We offer our witness to God’s unfailing love that

that shows up in hospital waiting rooms, in Zoom chats, in worship and in conversations between friends. We gather to affirm these promises. “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

We affirm the promise that God shows up.

Matthew extends that promise through Jesus’ response to the harried crowds who have been following him. They have been watching him as he has been teaching and healing, curing diseases and sickness. The gospel takes a slight bend in the road at this point. Matthew panning across the sea of faces to focus squarely on Jesus’ face of compassion. He then shifts his attention from a ministry of healing to ministries of empowering his disciples.

There is a change in Jesus’ perception, Matthew says, for he sees the crowd with eyes of compassion, as they “were harassed and helpless.” God shows up, and then calls the disciples to respond.

Matthew’s words are deliberate: “harassed and helpless” evoke images of victims who have been brutally beaten and unnecessarily bullied. Wandering sheep evoke Old Testament images of God’s people abandoned by unfaithful rulers. God is here, says Matthew, present among those who are bruised and beaten, ignored and powerless.

That promise both comforts and challenges.

It comforts us with the reminder that Jesus sees those who are hurting, and that he stands with those who feel as though everything is lost. Jesus, the good shepherd, gathers his lambs from among those who have felt scattered and abandoned. Those who have felt lost in their faith, those who have experienced the cruel pain of the world. All of these are gathered by the Good Shepherd.

Jesus looks at all of these. They seem to him to be a field ready to be harvested. They are ready to know the promise of a God who shows up.

But then comes the challenge. Jesus has promised that all of these hurting and aimless persons are members of the kingdom. He has proclaimed that the kingdom of God belongs to the meek and persecuted. He now turns his attention to those who will announce that kingdom. He gives to the disciples the charge to bring all who are hurting who are scared and alone, into that kingdom. That is the work of the disciples. The challenge comes as he turns to those closest to him and says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.”

It's like a big sign that reads "Help wanted...urgently." Jesus is calling the church to carry forth this mission of compassionate witness. The disciples are called to the mission of shepherding with compassion, mercy, and grace.

Jesus looks around at the crowds and he sees the pain they are carrying. God has paid attention to the brutality. God has heard the cries of those who believe they have been abandoned. This is the persistent claim of the gospel.

Jesus sees the pain of those around him. In response, he turns quickly and faces the disciples and enjoins them to see the need as he sees it. The pain is urgent, their cries agonizing. God has kept God's promises, but now comes the time for the people of God to respond. They are the laborers to whom God will rely. They are to see what God has seen, and they are to become the shepherds the hapless, hopeless crowds are longing to find.

God shows up, just as God has promised. Jesus sees, just as God has promised. And now Jesus calls...to the disciples...to the church...to us.

That is the promise we so often forget. Just like those who stood at Sinai, overwhelmed by the presence of God, we have stood in church and said "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do."

We have affirmed those promises in baptisms. We have affirmed them in joining the church and when we have received new members. We have affirmed them in the hearing of the Word and our response.

But like Israel, too often our feet have turned to clay.

There is urgency in Jesus' voice – now is the time. Do not sit around. Don't wait for someone else to act. Do not wait for the perfect moment. The time is now, and the needs are great. Now is the time for us to remember the promises we have made.

In these weeks following the death of George Floyd, each of us has struggled to process those events. We see these events through different prisms: some of us see it through the prism of the persistent sin of racism, some see it through the eyes of our own children, some see it with our own struggles to understand. And as the unrest has continued, so has the ongoing work that each of us needs to do.

George Floyd's name, along with the names of so many others, is now part of who we are. And we say his name out of the prayer to become more compassionate, to grow in mercy, to deepen our understanding.

There are many ways we can process these events, but most importantly, each of us can pray.

We can pray for compassion that transcends political differences. We can pray for justice that arises from the reminder that we are all children of God, liberal and conservative. We can pray for the strength to say, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

In his book “A Bigger Table,” John Pavlovitz calls for the church to remember the promises it has so often forgotten. “Jesus was a shepherd,” Pavlovitz writes. “And this is perhaps one of the most challenging things we face as we seek to personally emulate him: equally embracing those we find unpleasant or unlovable or unworthy of welcome.”¹ Pavlovitz wonders what might happen if the church truly practiced this sort of compassionate welcome. What would happen if we remembered the promises of God? What would happen, he says, if instead of gathering around sipping nice coffee and hearing well-polished anthems we would gather around a table where we could sit and linger long enough to recognize the Divine within themselves and others? What if we simply set a table where others could come?

In that moment we can be seized by the grace which knows God’s presence—and we too might be willing to say, “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

Amen.

¹ John Pavlovitz, “A Bigger Table,” (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2017).