

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2017

"STANDING ON THE PROMISES"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 40:1-11 ~ Mark 1:1-8

Our son was very small. It was summer time. We had promised him that we would take him to Six Flags Fiesta Texas the next day. He got up so eagerly ... filled with excitement ... but it was pouring and the forecast said it would continue to come down in buckets all day. "I'm afraid we can't go," I said. "The weather's just too bad." I thought he would understand, but he began to cry. "You promised!" he wailed. "You promised!" He was inconsolable. We felt awful. We felt like bad parents. But what could we do? It was a promise we couldn't keep. He eventually forgave us (I think). But I will always remember that cry in my head: "You promised! You promised!"

All of us make promises. All of us depend on the promises that others make. Most of us sincerely intend to keep those promises when we make them ... to be good to our word. But sometimes promises don't mean as much to those who make them as to those who receive them. So, we forget ... or something happens ... or we are prevented by circumstances beyond our control. The truth is ... none of us has the power or foresight to keep all our promises. We can't even guarantee that we will be alive tomorrow. So, we learn, as we go, to be careful about giving our word and even more careful about where we put our trust.

The whole project of our faith may be defined as our trust in God's promises. We live in the meantime ... between promise and fulfillment. We stake everything on the expectation that God will keep God's word. That is all our hope. But is it a reasonable hope?

The prophet we read this morning, Isaiah of the Exile, was certainly having a hard time holding on to his hope. His people had been forcibly relocated in the city of Babylon ... far away from their beloved city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was just a pile of rubble now. They were far away from the Temple of their God who had lost in battle against Marduk, the high god of the Babylonians. What was there to hope for now?

We cannot live without hope, at least not well, at least not long. Hope sustains us when nothing is going right. Says William Lynch, "This is our classic image of hope: overcoming difficulty, liberating the self from darkness, escaping from some kind of prison. The sense of hope is: there is a way out. The sense of hopelessness is: there is no way out, no exit. It is the sense of impossibility, checkmate, eternal repetition."

But hope is not just about liberation from suffering. It is about positive direction and engagement and momentum. In his work on Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling, Andy Lester talks about the importance of our future stories. We are a narrative people, he says. We think of our lives as stories in process with a past, present, and future. Most counseling theories have led people to examine their past to see what got them into the mess they're in. But he says that people's "future stories" are even more important to our sense of self.

Where do you see yourself five years from now? Ten years from now? The way we imagine our future determines the direction we take ... the momentum we enjoy ... and the way we behave. People who experience sudden change ... say the failure of a business or the loss of a loved one ... lose their future stories and are disoriented until they can re-form a sense of what is to come ... and what is to become of them. If you have a dysfunctional future story, your future is not likely to turn out well. If it is negative or unrealistic, you are bound for difficulty. And if you have no hope ... no healthy sense of the future being better than the present ... you get stuck, you even get sick. When working with urban youth in Chicago I remember asking the kids who were hanging out on the streets where they will be five years from now, and many of them responded: "Dead." No wonder some of them behave the way they do.

You can hear this despair in the voice of the prophet. God lays a wonderful message on Isaiah's heart:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

God's heart was breaking for the people. Oh yes, they deserved what they suffered. They certainly brought it on themselves. Israel had broken covenant with God over and over. Their prophets had warned them ... God had given them chance after chance. The message came again and again: "Repent! Turn from your foolish ways, turn from this path of destruction. Turn to God. That's where your best future waits." Isaiah of Jerusalem had warned them not to place their faith in arms and chariots but to rest in God and seek God's peace. Jeremiah had warned them not to trust in alliances with other nations but to understand God's judgment against them and seek peace. But they ignored the prophets. They experienced the devastation of war and they were dragged into exile leaving everything they loved in ruins behind. But God never quits loving us even we reap the whirlwind of our own idolatries. God owed them nothing, but God loved them still ... so that even before the dust had settled and the smoke had cleared, God sent the word to the prophet to shout good news to the exiles. As the prophet listens,

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A new exodus awaits ... a resurrection ... a new day for the people of God ... deliverance ... destiny ... glory ... good news!

Well, the prophet heard the news. He got his preaching orders. But he couldn't feel the hope. He couldn't see the vision.

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

Maybe he had worn himself out trying to get these exiles to hold on to their faith. Maybe his optimism had finally wilted under the hard realities of trying to start over in a new place. He had a tough job, getting these people to trust in their God after what they'd been through ... getting them to stay faithful ... getting them to invest in a new vision. When they were just trying to make it through the day, it must have been so hard to get them invested in some bright dream of tomorrow. Meanwhile, he had to help them bury their children and negotiate with the authorities, and try to feed the folks who couldn't make a go of it on their own. He was a good preacher. He was tuned into his people. He wanted to lead the way ... to be bright and cheerful and faith-filled and joyful ... but inside he was also carrying their sorrow, their pain, their struggle. He was one of them. It was his struggle, too. What's more, he was out on a limb and God had put him there, because he'd been saying, "Don't give up on God," but it had been years since God had done anything at all.

"Cry out!" God told him. And he said to God, "Cry what? What's the use? They aren't going to listen. If they do, they won't stick with the vision. For that matter I don't think I can, God. Don't you understand that we have all the strength ... all the longevity ... all the attention span of a stalk of summer hay?"

Perhaps the prophet believed that if they did get out of this mess somehow, that his people would just behave the same way as before ... and wind up in the same state or worse. We know their history. We know our history. If our spiritual health and our connection with God depend on our keeping our promises to God ... on our being good enough ... and strong enough and ... faithful enough to follow all God's laws, it's never going to happen. We just aren't good at keeping our word.

Isaiah sounds like a lot of "burned out" people that I know today who are just worn out with trying to make the world a better place. Who can be idealistic anymore? It's easier to be cynical, to be filled with despair, to give up. The prophet's protest could be our modern mantra: "What shall I cry? All flesh is grass."

Exactly how it happened isn't clear. But Isaiah had an "Aha!" moment. Was God still speaking or did this realization dawn upon Isaiah from within? Was it revelation or inspiration or desperation or all of the above? In any case, Isaiah's reflection on the weakness and fickleness of people was affirmed: "Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades," yes, that is true, and you can't rely on people to keep their promises. "BUT! the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8). The word of our God will stand forever! The promises of God don't depend on us! The love of God doesn't depend on us! Forever isn't in our vocabulary. We aren't eternal. We aren't omnipotent. We aren't even faithful. But God is. What God says, God has the power to do. And God will do it, in God's time.

So, the prophet repented. He turned away from despair and turned towards hope. He turned away from bitter sulking and turned towards jubilant celebration. Oh, mind you, nothing had changed. He was still in exile ... the people were still discouraged ... they still faced desperate times. But God had spoken, and it would happen. So, the prophet told the people to prepare the way of the Lord, to get ready, God is coming. Wait for it! Watch for it! Work for it! He was so sure that he began to celebrate beforehand. *Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

It seemed impossible. A lot of the people wouldn't listen ... they couldn't believe it ... they gave up on God and joined the Babylonians. But some of them listened. A small group who met once a week in an upper room kept the dream alive. Then ... in less than fifty years ... Babylon fell to the Persians. And the Persians let the exiles go back home. And the people rebuilt the city, rededicated the Temple, and rededicated themselves to the living God. What if we knew that fifty years from now our grandchildren would enter a new world of peace without hunger and injustice and war ... a day of cooperation and mutual respect ... a society which cared most for the least among them? Fifty years is not so long for a prayer to be answered. Don't go by what your eyes see ... by what the outer voices of cynicism and the inner voices of despair tell you. In God, our hope is real.

What is our hope? Our hope is in the name of the Lord ... in God's incomprehensible power ... in God's absolute ability to keep God's Word. Our hope is in the loving Providence of God ... in God's tender mercies ... in the incomprehensible kindness of God's love: *"He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."* And that's the way it happened.

A few centuries later though, the people were in trouble again. The world was a desperate place. Their institutions had failed them ... and their leaders had oppressed them ... and the world powers plotted against them. But a rugged preacher named John ... Martha Stewart's worst nightmare ... smelling like a camel and calling people to change their ways ... a wild and crazy guy who ate honey crunch grasshoppers for breakfast ... went out to the wilderness and remembered the words of a prophet long before: *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*

He told the people to repent and be baptized. He told them, "The One who is more powerful than I is coming. It's time to get ready." And when Mark told the story about Jesus of Nazareth, he started with John. He called the announcement of this peculiar preacher, *"The beginning of the gospel, the glad tidings, the good news of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God"* (Mark 1:1).

And in this holy season of Advent, we hear the good news again ... announced beforehand, but sure to happen. God is coming! No matter how dreary and hopeless this world may seem ... no matter how cynical and despairing you may feel, take hope. God is coming! You are not stuck. A better tomorrow is coming and you can prepare the way. As Jurgen Moltmann puts it, hope means "Jesus Christ is our future." So let's get ready ... shall we!?

May we pray?

Our hope is in you, O Christ. Bring us also to that "Aha" moment that you gave Isaiah of the exile. In these dark days, let us shine the light of your promise. As others despair that things can ever be different, help us to be different. Where there is so much bad news, we will proclaim the good news. And by our love, we will prepare the way for your Advent into this world which needs you so much. We take you at your Word, Lord. Amen.