

MESSAGE: “Promises to Keep”

Text: Genesis 12:1-7

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to introduce the theme of promise-keeping with Robert Frost’s poem, “*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,*” and to trace it through scripture and contemporary expression of Christian faith.

Introduction

Disarming in its simplicity, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* could be a springboard to many conversations. We could emphasize the importance of rest and reflection, or the ‘tug-o-war’ between conforming to society and yearning for adventure and the wild. We could speak of obligation and freedom, or curiosity about the unknown. We could personify the woods as ‘death’ and speak of suicidal ideation. We could imagine a baptism of snow and the gift of a new beginning. I toyed with the idea of asking you to form groups of three or four to talk about what the poem means to you. But, in the end, I decided to reflect with you on the promises that tether the poet to his intended journey, purpose and destination.

On the surface, the poem speaks of a man who sets out on a journey on December 21st, the winter solstice when dark comes earlier than any other day of the year. There is a gentle snowfall and he lingers for a moment by the edge of a forest, watching the snowfall. In his imagination, his horse reminds him of his intended purpose, even as he considers the world beyond himself. He would like to linger longer, though darkness is already at hand, but he remembers promises made that he intends to honor. The repetition of the last line, like an echo carried by the wind, suggests a greater purpose for promises kept, perhaps even, an eternal one.

Though God speaks in many ways, and often speaks through poets and songwriters, I believe Christian preaching, by definition, is based on a biblical text for purposes of explanation and application. Let us follow Frost’s lead then, by considering the weight and purpose of promises made first in the Bible, and then in life.

You don’t have to read very far into the Bible before you find broken promises. In fact, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that the biblical record is a sequence of promises made, some by God, some by humanity, and promises kept or broken, kept by God, often broken by humanity. “You may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but not of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden...” So what did humanity do? Eat of the forbidden fruit.

There are consequences for promises broken. Expulsion from Eden follows, along with suffering and death itself, but God's faithfulness endures even when human promises are broken. God gives a prophecy that will one day reverse the curse of broken promise and restore paradise lost. We find the germination of that seed in Genesis, chapter 12.

Read: Genesis 12:1-7.

God promises that 'all families of the earth' shall be blessed through Abraham. God confirms this promise by 'cutting a covenant.' What exactly does that mean? In several ancient cultures of the Fertile Crescent, when a stronger army conquered another, a covenant was established to spell out the commitments and tribute the weaker would make to the stronger. Stipulations of the covenant were specified in treaty and recorded on two copies, one for the suzerain or victor and one for the vassal or conquered. In Moses' time, for example, the tablets bearing ten commandments were an example of such a covenant.

The ancient practice of 'cutting a covenant' is perhaps strange and even offensive to our modern sensibility for it involved the killing of a calf or similar animal, which was then cut from snout to tail and laid out on either side of a path. The vassal would walk on the path and say, "May this happen to me and my people if we do not meet the stipulations of the covenant as specified in the treaty."

If you read Genesis 15, you will see God confirming his promise to Abraham with such a covenant. The extraordinary thing in this passage, though, is the fact that it is not Abraham guaranteeing the promise, taking the walk of pledge, but God, represented by smoke and torch, taking the walk of pledge. Though humans break their promises to God and one another time and time again through the pages of the Bible, Hebrew and New Testament, God keeps the divine promise--giving a Messiah who would redeem from sin, heal brokenness and conquer death.

There is a cost to keeping promises. The man in Frost's poem knows this as he resumes his 'miles to go before he sleeps.' God certainly knows this as he watches his beloved Son die upon a cross of wood. We discover it, too, as we try to be faithful to spouse and children, giving and service, community and country. Ask any veteran if there is a cost to safeguarding the freedom of others and you will hear amazing stories of courage and sacrifice. Ask any doctor if there is a cost to preserving health and life and you will hear amazing stories of intervention and healing. Ask any teacher if there is a cost to effective education and you will hear amazing stories of inspiration and discovery.

There are promises to be kept in the church family, too. The homebound communion ministry that we are working on together is an example of a promise kept. Cherished

members who cannot be present with us in worship deserve the dignity of home visitation by members of the church they love, support and pray for. For those who wish to be a part of this, there is a training offered following worship next Sunday. In our membership vows, we promise to support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. That is the heart, incidentally, of the course I will be facilitating for four Sundays, beginning today at 11:30 am. It is never too late to join us.

But I want to close today by asking you to help me keep another promise that we have made as a church family, this time to our youth. When children are baptized, we, as a congregation, promise to “nurture them in Christ’s holy church, that by our teaching and example they may be guided to accept God’s grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life.”

We keep this promise in part by helping with Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Youth Fellowship, scouting ministries and the like. But we also keep it by offering a journey of Confirmation when kids are 10, 11, 12-years-old or above. It is my hope to facilitate such a journey this fall. If all goes well, we will join with Calvary UMC in Lewiston with this endeavor. What I have found works well is to invite youth-participants to three overnight retreats or ‘church lock-ins’ as they are sometimes called, Friday night into Saturday morning, one in September, one in October and one in November, with a Celebration trip and special worship service in December.

The pastors will facilitate the journey, but we need chaperones to assist us with the overnight spiritual adventures. We also need mentors, one mentor for each youth participating. Mentors meet with the youth in accordance with our safe sanctuary practices to share their faith journey with God and what the Church means to them. The relationships formed become precious to both mentor and youth. Please pray and consider serving either as a chaperone or as a mentor. I guarantee that you will be blessed by helping us keep the promise we have made to our youth and future.