Sunday, June 12, 2005
THE PROMISES OF GOD
Psalm 145:8-13

A central theme that threads its way through the Bible is the story of an astounding promise, a commitment made by God involving all of creation. The central point of this commitment from the Creator is an unconditional promise of love to human beings and to the whole creation.

Psalm 145, read today, speaks of God's promises: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and His compassion is over all that He has made."

The Bible begins with the story of creation, where you are told that God made you and all creation good. The promise that all the world will continue to be blessed is made specific in the story of Abraham and Sarah.

This promise continues in the story of Moses. When Moses had an overwhelming experience of the presence of God and knew that God was calling him for a special task, he was reluctant. He wanted to know more about this Holy Presence that was calling him. So he asked, "What is your name?" The name that came to him from the burning bush in Hebrew can best be translated as, "I am the One who will be there with you." In other words, "I am with you. I will never desert you."

The stories in the Bible are filled with the promises of God. Here are some additional examples: "Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage, and God will strengthen you."

"The Lord is your keeper. The Lord will preserve you from all evil. God will preserve your soul. The Lord will preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary. He gives power to the faint, and to those who have no might, God increases strength. Even young people shall faint and be weary, they shall fall exhausted; but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Jesus, in his teachings, reaffirmed God's promises. He said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink. Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

He also said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and those who seek find, and to those who knock, it will be opened."

"Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

The Apostle Paul also knew of God’s promises. He wrote, “We know that in everything God works for good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purposes. If God is for us, who is against us? There is nothing in all creation that will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, your Savior.”

When you make promises and keep your promises, you are acting as God acts. What a marvelous act a promise is! When you make a promise, you are reaching out into an unpredictable future and making one thing predictable: that you will be there, even when doing so costs you more than you expected.

When you make a promise, you stretch yourself forward into circumstances that can go out of control. Yet, with a promise, you say that you will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With a promise, you create an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future and that of others. When you make a promise to someone, you are telling that person you are going to do what needs to be done despite how you might be feeling. You are also saying you will go against peer pressure if necessary to keep your promise.

When you make a promise and keep it, you are living up to the identity God gave you. Much of today’s culture tells you that self-fulfillment comes mostly by getting more and more stuff. By contrast, Jesus taught that you become a genuine self when you live up to your true identity as one who has been created in God’s image by making commitments that matter to other people and keeping them.

Some people ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from their accomplishments. Others ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from their feelings. Still others ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from what others think about them. But when you dare to make and keep promises that are helpful to others, you find out who you really are. You become who God created you to be.

Notice that I said you are like God when you make promises that are helpful to others. Not all promises are good promises. Those that are not good promises need to be broken. You could make a promise to hurt someone who has hurt you. Some people promise hate and revenge. I knew a man who promised revenge against someone, and his whole life became consumed with trying to keep that promise. He became a slave to his hate. That promise needed to be discarded.

It is the power of good promise-making and promise-keeping that makes you what you are, a person created in God’s image. For example, somewhere today, a father is saying to himself, “I want my impossible teenage son to get out of the house and never come back. He is driving me out of my mind.” But then he remembers a promise he made to his son when he was born, and he decides to hang in there with that son.

Maybe somewhere today, a minister is thinking, “I am going to give up my calling and find a line of work that pays off in a little more appreciation. God knows this congregation has given me third-degree burnout.” But then she remembers a promise she made to God when she was ordained, and she stays with her vocation.

Could it be that somewhere today, a church member is complaining, “The church is always asking for money, and there are so many things I want, and all of them take money. So I’m going to put my pledge to the church last, and if there’s some money left over, then I will give it to the church.” But then he remembers the promise he made when he joined the church and filled out a pledge card. And he keeps his promise.

I am continually impressed every day by people who still make and keep good promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough. They hang on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who are a pain in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make.

At the same time, I am worried because I see other people who do not take promise-making and promise-keeping seriously. Some years ago, Robert Bellah and four of his colleagues published an important study about the loss of commitment in our culture. The book’s title is Habits of the Heart, with the subtitle Individualism and Commitment in American Life.

The study shows that there are more and more people for whom promise-making and promise-keeping is not a priority. Pursuing one’s own fulfillment is the first priority, and if that means breaking a promise, that’s okay.

All of society gains when people make good promises and keep them. What would your life be like if the only kind of commitment you could get from someone was, “I’ll be there if I can, but don’t count on it?” Or if, in a marriage ceremony, each partner said to the other, “I promise to love you as long as I feel like it?”

Think about how unbearable life would be if you could never count on anyone to make and keep a good promise. You would go insane with uncertainty if the people you need to trust the most — your spouse, your friends, your parents, your co-workers — never made promises you could trust.

Our whole social fabric, our economic system, and your deepest and most cherished human relationships are held together by an invisible cord called a promise, a commitment. Every important relationship you have with other people depends on the strength of that unseen cord.

What keeps a marriage together? When two people get married, they take on two new identities. They say to each other, in the spirit of the God who told Moses, “I am the one who will be with you no matter what happens.” In the marriage vows, examples are then given: “In sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live.”

Take note that from the Bible’s point of view, the promises of God and human promises to each other are not the same as a contract. This is not to downgrade the importance of contracts in many situations. Contracts are conditional. The promises of God are unconditional. God loves you whether or not you love God. Hopefully, you love your children, if you have them, whether or not they return that love. A true promise is made without concern for what you will get in return.

When you get right down to it, everything that is done in a good society — from a nation conceived and born in liberty, to a family reunion, to being a member of a church, or making a financial pledge to the church — hangs on the thin thread of promises made and promises kept.

Toward the end of his three volumes on the history of the French Revolution, Thomas Carlyle concludes that the revolution failed, not because of corruption in high places, but because ordinary people in their ordinary places neglected to keep their promises. Without promise-making and promise-keeping at every level of society, you are in trouble. Without promise-making and promise-keeping, no law, no police force, no legal contracts can keep a community healthy.

Caring and promise-making go together. To make and keep good promises is to live fully in God's image. It is to be compassionate as God is compassionate. You are able to keep your good promises because you can depend on God's promises.

Pauli Murray was the descendant of a rape victim. The rape was committed before the Civil War by a wealthy North Carolina lawyer, Sidney Smith. The rape victim was a young slave woman. In this unusual case, the baby named Cornelia was acknowledged as a member of the family. Mary Ruffin Smith, the aunt of the baby, listened to her conscience, and it told her that this child, born a slave, was also, after all, her niece. When the slave niece was ten, Mary Ruffin brought Cornelia to the village church to be baptized.

On Sundays, Cornelia sat in the balcony during the worship services. Slaves could not sit on the main floor. She was 21 when the Union Army set her free. She married a black Union veteran from Pennsylvania. Pauli Murray grew up in that family. She was Cornelia's granddaughter, part African American, part Native American, and part white. Her grandmother taught her to be proud of all three heritages.

Pauli became a leader in the civil rights movement. She also became a lawyer, professor of law, poet, and author. At the age of 62, she entered an Episcopal seminary to study for the ministry. In January 1984, she was ordained as the first black woman priest in the Episcopal Church. Did I say black? She would say black and white, Native American and Irish. She was ordained at the Old Chapel of the Cross, at the very altar where her grandmother was baptized as a slave.

Pauli Murray knows that the promises of God are true. She knows that in Christ there is no east or west, no south or north. She believes the promise of Jesus: "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." She keeps her good promises because she knows God keeps promises. Amen.