

Again, the Promises

February 8, In the Year of Our LORD, 2009
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
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Isaiah 40:21-31

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. [God] will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Three points:

God has no equal.

God fulfills all promises.

God never stops making promises to us.

God has no equal. Now I know we know that – I suspect at many levels. For all our creativity as humans, we know that only God can create worlds – and no scientist yet has done the “Dr. Frankenstein” thing and created the spark of life. For all our hubris and that of the really arrogant, we recognize that the difference between human and divine is quite vast. Today, we are reminded of promises kept and promises broken, of God Who keeps them and humans who so often do not.

Certainly, all of us are pragmatic if not cynical enough to realize that all too many promises made by politicians come to naught – but what of those promises we have come to expect to be fulfilled? Did we not assume that someone, somewhere, somehow was ensuring that our food – like one of today’s basics – peanuts – that our food was safe? As unsettling as it is to read the list of more than 1300 peanut filled foods, yesterday’s news that the Lynchburg, Virginia based company *knowingly* shipped salmonella-laced products from its plant in Georgia is obscene. The reports of what officials found in that plant remind us of what Upton Sinclair wrote about

conditions in meatpacking plants more than one hundred years ago – which led to the *promise* that state and federal officials would ensure food safety.

Last year it was tainted milk in China. Yesterday, this report hit the CNN wires: that “at least 84 Nigerian children have died after ingesting teething medicine that contained a solvent typically found in antifreeze, the country's health minister said Friday.” What is bothersome is that when I went looking for the story on the internet and googled “Nigeria Drugs” this item popped up:

Mohammed Yaro Budah, a pharmacist and the president of the Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria, said that 70% of the drugs in Nigeria are fake.

The article said nothing about the death of children, so I realized it was written before Friday. Glancing up at the date, I had to pause: March 23, 2002. Seven years, and clearly no one did anything substantial to change the ways things are!

While we could compose quite a litany of broken promises by humans – like the one about the SEC serving as a vigilant watchdog over securities and finances on Wall Street – or companies that promised retirement funds for employees that are, ... oops ... no longer there – sorry! – there is much to celebrate in human knowledge and the promise it will be put to good use. While the calm of Captain Chesley Sullenberger might be a talented gift from God, he showed the value of specific and deliberate training so that an airline pilot could safely negotiate the loss of both engines and return 151 persons to loving families after an unexpected visit to the chilly waters of the Hudson. On a personal note, although Dr. Vulstyke didn't “promise” good results, the prescription drug Inderol seems to have done as suggested as I have not endured a single migraine since taking a minimal dose of that drug every day since last fall.

The point is that in contrast, God has no equal and that is certainly true when it comes to promises. Now, to be sure, some people have a notion of quid pro quo – that if they behave in a certain way God will promise them a long, healthy, safe life. In some churches, the promise is even made that faith and devotion to God will make one wealthy – particularly if one is generous to the preacher making that promise – who is speaking, presumably, on behalf of the Almighty God. What rubbish – particularly that last part about wealth! What God *does promise* is God's presence throughout all of our lives – and the gifts that are accompanied by that presence – the gifts of love, hope, grace, redemption, salvation, faith and fellowship. God, Who experienced the loss of an “only child,” promises to stand by us and share our pain – and our joy – and God continues to fulfill those promises even when we clearly do not deserve them. There is clear evidence that God answers prayers – but most often they are those that ask for humility, patience, grace, a forgiving spirit, calm, or a willingness to look at the bigger picture – particularly the one that is beyond the scope of one's own universe.

During the first Adult Bible Class this past Monday, which Nancy has abbreviated on the office calendar as ABC – which puzzled me at first, but now I find somewhat amusing because sometimes we need to go back to the very basics of our faith – and what is more basic than ABC? – I digress, during the first twenty minutes of that first class, I summarized more than a thousand years of history starting with Abraham so that I could explain the significance of this morning's reading from Isaiah 40. You get the nineteen-second version (how I love to count and time things!)

By the sixth century BC, more than one thousand years after the life of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but more than five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the people of Judea and Jerusalem misbehaved enough that God allowed the Babylonians to conquer them, haul the survivors into exile and then – after forty years – the exile ended and they were given permission to return to their “holy” land.

The words at the end of Isaiah 40 are a reminder that God continued to make promises to a people who so often erred and went astray. Heard for the first time over twenty-five hundred years ago at the very end of an incredible time of trial, when Cyrus of Persia proclaimed that all exiles could go home, their significance is no less timely and pertinent today. God continues to make promises to us – promises made despite all the times we as humans demonstrate we do not deserve God’s continued, amazing and ongoing love – but perhaps, more importantly, in times of trial and suffering and upheaval.

Those words may sound empty to the hundreds of thousands of persons in this land who lost their jobs just last month. That passage may sound hollow to the families of 84 children in Nigeria who lost their lives because the “teething” medicine contained anti-freeze. Isaiah 40 might not mitigate the pain of those who are facing salmonella poisoning – that could and should have been avoided – but those words remind us, the faithful, that to rely *solely* on humans and human motivations (like profit at any “cost”) is dangerous – that God has no equal when it comes to making promises, much less fulfilling them, and that God never gives up reminding us, time after time after time – no matter what we do that disappoints, no matter how often we get the message wrong and believe and act as though God is God on our behalf – if not solely so – that the everlasting God ... no let Isaiah say it – for there are few words as powerful and as beautiful:

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. [God] will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Amen.