

Keeping Promises – Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 – February 25, 2018
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One of the earliest lessons we learn in life is to keep our promises. If you tell someone you are going to do something, you do it. And even as small children, we learned that if someone neglected to honor a promise made to us, we experience a sense of pain and hurt. Keeping our promises is an integral part of our interpersonal relationships and helps to establish trust between people. But when promises made are forgotten or intentionally broken by the people we have come to trust, that trust begins to fade over time. Some of the most painful moments in our lives come as a result of promises broken or trust betrayed.

The older we get, the more broken promises we have experienced throughout our lives. We may even begin to look at the world through cynical eyes. We develop an attitude of “I’ll believe it when I see it.” I think this serves as a type of defense mechanism in our brains – if we don’t believe a promise will be kept, we won’t get hurt when it isn’t. And then we’ll be pleasantly surprised if the promise is honored. We have even gotten to the point of having an almost universal understanding that politicians are NOT going to keep the promises they made during their campaigns. And others will call us naïve if we are shocked when they don’t follow through with their promises.

Yet as skeptical as many of us may be, we still can fall prey to false promises. Experts in the field of marketing try to convince us of their product’s worth. In fact, companies will pay big money for flashy ads and boastful promises that entice people to purchase their products. Will fall prey to their claims, believing that owning their wares will make us happier or more successful. Maybe in some ways these messages contain hints of truth, but they seem to promise too much and the final product delivers too little.

Many of us have learned to look for the small print in advertising. Obviously, companies want to share only the positive stories about their products. The negative side is never highlighted. The only hint that a product may not do what it claims to do, occurs as a line of small print. Medications are notorious for touting their promises of better health, but the small print often warns of side effects that we may find not worth the trouble.

A promise made. But a promise unlikely to be kept. No wonder many of us can be so cynical about promises we hear.

Unfortunately our mistrust goes beyond these simple marketing ploys. In our communities and our country, we have lost trust in our government and local institutions, in our leaders, in our systems. We have adopted that wait and see attitude because we’ve experienced too many promises not kept.

Many people in the younger generations have come to the realization that social security probably won’t be around for us when we reach retirement age. And no matter our age, many of us wonder if the promise of a secure future will be available. We are skeptical and cautious. We wonder, who can we trust?

Of course the easy, churchy answer is that we can trust God. We say it, but do we really believe it? In those times when everything around us, when all the things we trusted seem to be falling away, seem to be crumbling, do we really believe that God is there for us? In bad times we can find it hard to believe, to trust, external promises. In the rough times we tend to hunker down and go into survival mode.

Today in our Old Testament lesson we heard the story of God's covenant with Abram. God had called Abram 24 years previously and made the initial promise to him that he would be the father of many nations. But 24 years later that promise had not yet been realized. Now God spoke to Abram again, the man was now 99 years old. God again made the promise to him that Abram would be the father of multitudes, and even kings, that they would possess the land of Canaan, and furthermore God promised to be the God of him and his descendants forever.

Some promises are made in good faith, but over time circumstances change, and the promise is broken. I doubt that few marriages are started with the anticipation of future divorce. Yet a large number of marriages will end in divorce.

I can think back to some of my best friends during my youth. We made vows to each other to be best friends forever, promising to never lose touch, promising to retire together in the old folk's home. But time changes things and people grow apart. We hold no hard feelings for those long lost friendships – in fact they often bring warm reminders of good times past. But because of these transitory interpersonal relationships we wonder, will God always be there? Or will time change that relationship, too?

The simple answer is that people are people, and God is God.

We can trust God because of who God is and what God does. When God came to Abram, God said to him, "I am El Shaddai." This is translated for us as God Almighty, and this is the first time this name El Shaddai is used for God in the Old Testament. There is some debate on the actual meaning of this name, but one possibility is God of the mountains. It seems to be a reference to the creative nature of God. Also in the text is the reference to the fruitfulness of Abram's descendants. This world fruitfulness reminds us of the creation story. So here we have an image of God as the creator. Why can we trust what God says? Because God is the Creator. God is the one who made us. Without God, we would not exist.

Furthermore, because God is the one who made us and Abram, God has the prerogative to change Abram's name. God tells Abram, you will no longer be called Abram but Abraham, meaning ancestor of a multitude. His wife's name is also changed – from Sarai to Sarah, which means princess. A fitting title for one who would ultimately have kings as her progeny. Even though they currently had no children, by changing their names, God was affirming that the promise would come to pass. One pastor wrote, "When God speaks, the deed is accomplished in fact – even though the deed waits actualization in time. This is a central issue in our faith. When God speaks, it is as good as done. When God says, 'Let there be light,' there is light. When God says Abraham is the ancestor of a 'multitude of nations,' the nations are born in fact, even though they will be delivered in time." (John Jewell, 2000, from the sermon "Promises, Promises," lectionary website)

What this writer is saying is that God is not constrained by time. When God speaks a command or a promise, that command or promise exists, though it may take time for us to see its realization. So when God made the promise to Abraham, that God would be the God of him and his multitude of descendants, God was making that promise to each one of us and to the generations that have come before and those that will come after us. The promise is eternal.

Many scholars believe that this passage of scripture was probably written during the time of the Babylonian exile. Let's think about what life was like for the people of Israel during the exile. Both the northern and southern kingdoms had fallen, Jerusalem – the capital and center of religious life - was destroyed, and many of the people were refugees in a foreign land. During a time of such a national

crisis, the people needed the reminder that they had not been forgotten by God. Though they lived in a time when the fruits of this promise to Abraham were hard to imagine, the focus of the covenant – when God said, I will be their God – that is something the Israelites could claim and hold on to. They needed to hear a reminder of the promise to help them through the difficult times that they were experiencing and the difficult times ahead. Sometimes we need a reminder as well.

The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that by trusting that God would keep God's promises, Abraham was showing his faith in God. Paul describes faith as trusting in God to keep God's promises. Abraham was able to trust that God would make good on God's promises, despite the overwhelming fact that he was 99 years old, and his wife was only a bit younger. A seeming impossible promise to keep. But Abraham trusted.

Because Abraham was willing to trust God, he entered into relationship with God. His faith in God put him into a proper relationship with God. And through that relationship he could see and believe the promises that God had made.

Paul says that the same applies to us when we trust in God, the one who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead. The promise of God is not reliant on our faith – let me say that again – the promise of God is not reliant on our faith, but our faith helps us to see that they are true. To experience them in our lives. Our lives, just like those of Abraham and Sarah, and like all those who have gone before us and those who will come after us, will be filled with barriers and detours. We will experience hardships and perhaps stumble a time or two. But our faith in God, through Jesus Christ, keeps us in relationship with God. When we live lives of faith, we believe that God's promises are true. We can hold onto those promises and trust in the one who gave them to us. Even when we can't see them fully realized.

During this season of Lent we are called to examine our lives, to reflect on our brokenness and our sinfulness. It is a time too, to reflect on God's great promises to us. Through Abraham and Sarah came the promise of a never-ending relationship with God. That covenant promise found its ultimate fullness in Jesus Christ – and through his resurrection the promise of eternity became real.

Sometimes we wonder if the promises of God seem too good to be true or may perhaps fade over time. But this promise is no marketing ploy. And in Jesus Christ there is no fine print – no disclaimer to discount the promise. The promises of God as we have received them through our faith in Jesus Christ are trustworthy and eternal. He is with us now and forevermore.