

## **Promises Made, Promises Kept – March 1, 2015**

### **Genesis 17:1-7**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

Sometime during my childhood I learned the saying “Don’t make a promise lightly” or “Don’t make a promise you can’t keep.” I learned that if you say you’re going to do something, then you had better do it. To renege on a promise made was a terrible thing – it not only let down the party to whom you made the promise, but it also compromised your own integrity. The more promises not kept, the less people would trust a person to be honest to their word.

In childhood, maybe naively, we trust that people will keep the promises they made to us. But as we get older, as we mature, we are confronted by scores of promises that were not kept. And so we can sometimes become cynical or skeptical when we here those words, “I promise.” We tend to look at things through the lens of doubt, adopting an “I’ll believe it when I see it” attitude. I see this as a self-defense mechanism that our brains provide to us to keep us from being let down when a promise isn’t kept.

Yet as skeptical as many of us may be, we still can fall prey to false promises. We are surrounded by them in the world of marketing. Wear this cologne, and the women will fall all over you. Drive this car, and you’ll be the envy of all your friends. Wear these clothes, and you’ll feel better about yourself. Maybe in some ways these messages contain hints of truth, but they seem to promise too much and the final product delivers too little.

Have you ever watched on of those infomercials on television? Infomercials are notorious for making promises about a product. The majority of these infomercials that I’ve stumbled across have to do with weight loss or nutritional supplements. They are 30 minutes of positive propaganda about a product. You never hear the negative side. The only hint that this product may not be helpful occurs as a line of small print. Several individuals will share their personal experience about how successful the product was for them, but at the bottom of your TV screen is a line of text in small type which reads, “Results not typical.” I find this interesting. It doesn’t say, this product may not work for a small number of people. Or, this product helps 80% of its users. No – it says, results not typical. If I interpret that correctly, it means that in the majority of the cases, this product won’t work. Furthermore, if you continue to seek out the fine print, you’ll probably see a line that reads, this product works best with a sensible diet and exercise program.

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 current world situation, we have lost trust in our government and local institutions, in our leaders, in our economic systems. We have adopted that wait and see attitude because we've experienced too many promises not kept.

Most folks in my generation and younger have come to the realization that social security probably won't be around for us when we reach retirement age. And today 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? 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 as yet that promise had not come to fruition. 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 in his letter to the Romans talks about the faith that Abraham exhibited by trusting, by believing in the promise. For Paul, to have faith means that we trust 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 infomercial. In Jesus Christ there is no fine print – no disclaimer that reads "results not typical." 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.