

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

"Promises"

Burt Bacharach's show tune "Promises, Promises" begins with a very apropos, "*Promises, promises I'm all through with promises, promises now*" might make a great lead into our two challenging lectionary readings for this morning. The readings of Isaiah 1 from the Hebrew Scripture begin with the same line of argument from God. "*When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; [Isa 1:15]*" captures a tone that most of Abraham's children would find unnerving, perhaps even downright scary. There is little left to the imagination about the God's intent! But let's continue to read verse 18 of Isaiah 1 and see in what direction the conversation with God is headed. "*Come now, let us reason. Though your sins are scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*" But the core text is next (v. 19), "*If you are willing and obedient*".

What does the Lord expect of the people of Israel? "Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" [vs 16c, 17]. These divine instructions may seem to refer to the ancient past, but I would argue that caring for the homeless, the unemployed, and the destitute in spirit would be a 21st C redux. The Lord is weary of empty promises

from Abraham's children, and it shows in text. How reliable are our promises? But really both the Old Testament and New Testament texts are really pointing well beyond the boundaries of human promises. We enter into a conversation that ping pongs between the promises of humans and the promises of God. The author of the Book of Hebrews, perhaps Paul or one of his students is deeply immersed in justification by faith. The phrase "by faith" appears throughout our reading and the context for our faith in God's promise is provided in the opening verse, "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*", and further in the scripture "*By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible*" [Hebrews 11:3].

In verse 3, the linkage between promises and faith begins to take shape. "*...so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible*" has the unmistakable echo of the sacred scripture of all three Abrahamic religions. In the Jewish Bible book of Genesis [1:1-2] we encounter "God created" and the theological pillar of *creation ex nihilo*, or the Hebrew term *bara'* [ברא], which is reserved for the creative power of God, i.e., to bring into being from nothing. Isaiah 44:6 tells us, that the Lord says, "I am the first and the last". Echoes from the New Testament abound for our 3rd verse of Hebrews 11. The

Gospel of John [1:3] informs us, “³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made”. Paul informs us in Romans 4:17, referring also to Genesis, “He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.” Here we find in the word of God the basis for Abraham’s righteousness, i.e., his faith in the promise of God, the very same promise God makes to us through Abraham. Echoes in Colossians 1:16 are unmistakable, “¹⁶For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...” Friends, the core message in Hebrews could be the closing argument of a divine prosecutorial attorney, i.e., all was called into being by God! Almost without saying, we voice the well known echo to this revelation, then in Whom shall I trust? Augustine, Calvin, John Wesley, et al. understood and professed that like Abraham, we must find the faith to trust in God, to trust and obey, to trust the Lord.

The third strand of the Abrahamic faith is Islam. In the Islamic book of divine revelation, the Qur’an [القرآن], we encounter a simple and profoundly relevant text, “God but says unto it, ‘BE’, and- it is” [2:117]. The promise of Abraham has the collateral force of the One who called all into being from nothing, created the visible from the invisible, and says “Be!” and- it is. Now the authors of the Common Lectionary were theologians, but not necessarily cosmologists with a stake in our premise of *creation-out-of-nothing (creation ex nihilo)*. The logic of cosmology might simply support the concept with the well-known statement, “matter is contingent (i.e., it may or not be called into existence); God, by current definition, is not contingent (i.e., God can neither be called nor not be called into existence). God is the alpha (first) and the last (omega). There are some cosmologists who would propose that space and time always existed, in some form or other. This exciting proposal, however, hangs on the modifying phrase “in some

form or other”. I shall leave a defense of this position to string theorists and cosmologists here among us.

Have you ever had a chance to look at the 3-dimensional graphical representation of the “Big Bang”? The most compelling image has the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe included in the figure, as this is a space probe launched in 2001 detects small changes in the temperature of the remnant heat from the Big Bang across the full sky. When presented to an audience, many scientists like I have an immediate question, namely, if this is the Big Bang, the “initiation” of creation, what is the black background representing? This query is quite serious and always generates animated discussions. Does the blackness constitute “nothingness”, “empty space”, or the “Creator’s scratch pad”? Through the lens of my faith, the blackness is “*nihilo*” in graphic abstraction, out of which creation was formed, i.e., *creatio ex nihilo*.

With this brief but necessary introduction to our lectionary readings, we can progress to our opening topic, “Promises, Promises”. In very sharp contrast, we are comparing human promises to the promise of God. Isaiah clearly calls us to task when we place too much credibility in the promises of humans. To accept that human promises can have the same gravitas and fidelity ascribed to the promise of God, is nothing more than idolatry. It is us humans seeking to establish ourselves in control. Paul will tell us that our fallenness as humans is assured. Humans are mortal, imperfect, stuck in lives filled with concrete messiness. Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, unmistakably the two most noted theologians of the 20th C (three covers of *Time* magazine between them), would wholeheartedly agree of the fallenness of human beings. So, should we give up on our promises? As Paul would say, “No, by no means!” The grace of the Creator is made

possible through our faith, not through our works. Yes, we are fallen, but God knows this. We are created in the image of God, by the Creator.

Dr. Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary, penned a poignant and deeply personal scriptural commentary online (see the *Huffington Post*, posted July 29, 2010) last week. In part, it deals directly with the question at hand, i.e., promises of humans versus the promise of God. Thinking that her marriage had been built upon “vows”, solemn promises made before God, she witnessed decades ago the crumbling of her marriage. She said, “In the throes of my dissolving life, on a particular hot summer night, I raged aloud at myself and at God. On my knees trying unsuccessfully to squash some ants who’d set up shop at the base of my trash can, I cried out, “Some great Christian I am, huh? I can’t keep my marriage together, much less my house clean.” She then shares that she imagined St. Paul there in her kitchen, leaning against the refrigerator door, “You’ve got this ‘sure foundation’ stuff wrong, dear heart. No vow you can ever make will last forever -- not marriage, church membership, or national loyalty. Humans are too fallible, fickle, finite, and fearful. The only promise that matters is the one God has made to you—the vow to love you regardless. Forever. No matter what.”

So, what does matter is not simply the promise, but also the source. Why does it matter?, the people of Israel ask, the Christian followers ask, and the Islam adherents ask? Because the promise is to love you and it comes from God.

For us humans, it is our promise that misleads us to think, “I am in control”.

The only promise that matters, however, is the one God has made to you—the vow to love you regardless. Forever. No matter what.”

For us humans, it is our promise to love someone “til death do us part”, thinking we control not only ourselves, but someone else.

The only promise that matters is the one God has made to you—the vow to love you regardless. Forever. No matter what.”

For us humans, we promise because we try our very best (sometimes) to follow the Greatest Commandment, leading us to think that we can actually make promises for a time that is yet to be brought into being.

The only promise that matters is the one God has made to you—the vow to love you regardless. Forever, i.e., there is no question about the time line. No matter what, there is no question about circumstances yet to be brought into being.”

Friends, Burt Bacharach provided us his own caveat about promises in the same song when we hear, “*Oh, promises, their kind of promises can just destroy a life. Oh, promises, those kind of promises take all the joy from life*”. Obviously, Bacharach had human promises to confront. Through the grace of God, the love of Christ Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, only one promise makes all the difference in the world. God loves you.

Let us pray.