

## ***Promises, Promises***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on the First Sunday of Advent  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
November 29, 2015  
Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16

When was the last time you made a promise you didn't keep? Now that's an uncomfortable question, isn't it? We don't like to think about the simple truth that we all make promises we don't keep. It seems dishonest at worst or disingenuous at best. We don't want to be the kind of person who doesn't keep a promise. We don't want to be someone who breaks that trust we've established with someone else be it a friend or a family member or a co-worker. We don't want to be known as someone whose word means little or nothing.

But, all that being said, we all break promises all the time. "Sure, I'll call you and we'll reschedule our lunch plans, just as soon as my life calms down a bit – I promise!" "Sure, I'll stop by and see you the next time I'm in town – I promise!" "I won't be late to work – to school – getting this task done – again! I promise!" "I'll take care of this (whatever it is), don't worry about it. I'll do it! I promise!" And then you don't, most likely for what seems like a very good reason in the moment. Promises, promises. Our lives are full of them – promises made, promises kept, promises broken. No wonder the idea of promise doesn't hold the same significance it once did.

Sometimes our breaking of promises is simply beyond our control. “Yes, I said I’d make it home for Thanksgiving but my flight got cancelled and there’s no other seats available!” “Yes, I promised you that one gift – the only thing you told me you really, really want for Christmas but I can’t find it anywhere! I’ve looked and looked and looked and it’s nowhere to be found.”

Other times, not so much. “Well, I know I promised I’d call you the other day but life was just so busy and I was so tired when I got home, I just couldn’t move!” I know I promised to visit my grandmother – my elderly aunt – whomever – but I just don’t know what to say when I get there! She doesn’t understand anything about my life and I don’t know what to say or do when I get there. It’s easier not to go. I’ll send her a card....

Promises, promises. So easily made. So easily forgotten, set aside, left behind, ignored. Okay, fine. But, given that attitude toward promises, why is it that we hold God to such a much higher standard than we ever hold ourselves? Why is it that we get so angry at God when we feel God doesn’t do what we think God has promised to do for us? Why is it that we are so convinced we know what God’s promises to us are in the first place? I prayed to God that I’d find a new job but it’s been months and nothing! I prayed to God that I would be healed of this terrible condition and its only gotten worse! I prayed to God that this problem I’ve been struggling with would be solved and nothing

has changed. Why should I even bother? What's the point if God doesn't answer my prayers the way I think they should be answered? What's the point of God's promise to be with me no matter what if I can't find God anywhere in my life right now? Promises, promises – they just feel like empty words to me even if they are supposed to be from God.

Well, dear friends, if that's how you're feeling – and let's be honest, we've all been there – then Jeremiah is your prophet for sure! Jeremiah is considered one of the major prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, right up there with Isaiah and Ezekiel. A prophet, in the Hebrew tradition, is one who is called by God to speak for God to the people. Jeremiah lived up to his calling and then some, no small feat given the extraordinary times during which he lived. Jeremiah lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a life span which included the tail end of the “Golden Age” of the Judean King Josiah known for his great reforms and whose defeat in battle led ultimately to the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. Important to know was that Jeremiah was not part of the Judeans who were deported to Babylon by the conquering Persians. Instead he remained behind for a time until he was ultimately held captive in Egypt by a group of Judean rebels who had tried unsuccessfully to overthrow their Persian overlords in Jerusalem.

Also important to know is that Jeremiah was not a popular prophet. He was grumpy and gloomy in most of what he said. He

was convinced that all the bad things which happened to Judah and Israel had been their own fault because they had allowed themselves to drift away from the correct practices of the Hebrew faith as laid out in the Torah. He believed, and stated publicly all the time, that the Judeans were destroyed by their conquerors because of the sin of apostasy – abandoning the beliefs God’s own self had given to them on Mount Sinai. In fact, Jeremiah was so over the top gloomy and negative that the last of the Judean kings – Zedekiah – had him imprisoned in a courtyard because he just couldn’t deal with all of Jeremiah’s negativity anymore.

This courtyard prison was where Jeremiah was when he made the statements contained in the text we read this morning. Now to get the full effect of what he says in these verses we have to stop a moment and realize where Jeremiah was – imprisoned in his own ruler’s courtyard for being so impossibly and relentlessly negative and gloomy. One could say Jeremiah had hit rock bottom. I mean, after all, the very leader God had sent him to prophesy to had him locked up rather than listen to him for one more moment. If ever Jeremiah had a reason to crank up the negativity even more, it was in this moment in the courtyard. If ever he had a right to scream out all the louder about the sin of apostasy he believed had created all this chaos and destruction surrounding him it was now as he was imprisoned by the king who had been such a willing participant in that apostasy. But,

guess what. That's not what Jeremiah did. That's not what Jeremiah said.

“The days are finally coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel, and the house of David,” he said. God's gonna keep the promise, Jeremiah says. God's gonna send someone new – a righteous branch for David who will execute justice and righteousness right here. And when that happens – and it will be soon – when that happens, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. God's going to keep that long ago promise, Jeremiah proclaims. God meant what God said, and God means it still.

Now the cynics out there are thinking, of course he started to become positive. He was locked up for being too negative. Of course he's going to change the message. He wants to be free again. Maybe. Or maybe, just maybe, his own unexpected captivity jolted him into realizing that he hadn't been giving the people what they really needed. He hadn't been the kind of prophet God needed him to be. Maybe, just maybe, this unexpected turn of events in his own life knocked some sense into Jeremiah and knocked him off his high horse, right down on the ground where everyone else was. Maybe then he understood in a whole new way that what the people needed and what God wanted him to help them understand was that hope was not gone. Jeremiah knew from his place of imprisonment in the king's

courtyard that a cataclysm was coming and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. But, he could do one thing and that one thing proved crucial. He could remind them of God's promise of hope would never, could never be destroyed. In fact, Jeremiah in this beautiful text this morning is telling the people of ancient Judah and still us today that God's promise of hope is never more present, never more real, than in those moments when it feels most fragile. God's promise of hope that a new day is coming can never been destroyed, can never be broken, can never be taken away from those who trust in the promises of God. In fact, this hope is born out of, is grounded in, our confidence in God's ultimate righteousness. In other words, we believe, we trust that God's promises to us are real and it is our faith in the truth of those promises that creates the new reality we seek. And that belief, that trust, is the ground of our hope. The new life, new beginnings, new possibilities God promises us are always possible, no matter what the calamity in our lives, begin and end with the reality of God's unfailing love and steadfast presence in our lives. This is our truth as people of God. This is our hope as followers of Jesus. This is our task as the Holy Spirit flows through us, leading us to the bright tomorrow God promises is out there for us.

So, as Advent begins, how does all this relate to me, to my life in the midst of inflatable snowmen on my neighbors, and blinking lights everywhere? How do I get past, move beyond, the

tremendous disconnect I feel every time I listen to the news about yet another awful, violent incident somewhere? Where is God in all this mess in my life as Advent begins? Where is hope, God's hope for me? Because I need it so very much. We need it so very much. The world just feels out of kilter somehow, and me right along with it. Where is this hope of Advent in the midst of all this chaos and uncertainty?

Right there. Right in the middle of the chaos and uncertainty, that's where the hope is because that's where it's most needed. Advent, dear friends, is all about feeling uncertain, off kilter, out of whack. It has to be because Advent is the one season of the church year when that's what we're paying attention to most intentionally – the unsettling tension between what is and what will be, as scholar Anne Stewart describes it. As prepare for this birth of the Christ Child on Christmas, we must rediscover why the coming of this tiny child in such an extraordinary way became such a hinge point for the world, because that's what it is! As followers of Jesus, we should feel out of whack as Advent begins in the midst of Christmas frenzy with all its shopping hype taken to extremes! Think about the commercial where the guy repositions his family for the annual Christmas photo around the Audi logo on the new car which is apparently a family Christmas present. And have you heard the radio commercial for the pajama-gram company? It's an on-line company whose chief

claim to fame is matching pajamas for every family member, including the cat and the dog, to wear on Christmas morning. Really? Is that what the world thinks Christmas is all about? Matching pj's for everyone, including Fluffy the cat and Spike the Rottweiler? Really? Geesh, no wonder the world feels out of whack for us. It is!!!!

And that's exactly why our pausing during Advent to rediscover and reclaim God's promises to us is such a vitally important thing to do. That's exactly why reminding ourselves that God's promises are more real than shiny gifts with big bows, more real than inflatable snowmen and shrubbery encased in blinking lights. God's promises, dear friends, are truly the only thing that's real in this crazy world we live in each day. Knowing that, reminding each other of that, is what will keep us sane during the annual Christmas craziness. That is our hope, that is God's promise to us always. May we find within ourselves the willingness, the courage, the strength to step out in faith to claim that promise and everything that comes with it. Let it be so, God. Please, let it be so. Amen.



