

‘Promises, promises.’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 1st June 2008

How do you feel when someone says: ‘I promise’. For myself, I someone feel nervous. I tend to think that if someone feels the need to add the words: ‘I promise’, there is something a bit shifty about what has just been said. After all, if someone has said that she is going to do something, shouldn’t that be enough? Why do they need to add ‘I promise’ as some sort of reinforcement. If someone promises to do something for us, it can mean that they simply want to get us off his or her back. ‘I promise’ may then simply mean: ‘Leave me alone. I don’t want to talk about it any further.’ And, by implication: ‘I’m not at all sure I will do what I say.’ When someone repeatedly breaks a promise to us and yet persists in saying: ‘I promise’, we may say cynically: ‘Promises, promises.’ In other words, we don’t believe a word of it. We don’t want promises; we want actions.

So what about the promises made in the Scriptures this morning? What precisely are we promised by God and by Jesus? Are these promises something we should believe? For make no mistake about it, a promise is what the story of Noah is about. It is a long and rambling story and it is easy to miss the ending and its significance. We just heard parts of the story this morning. How does the story end, do you remember? It ends with a rainbow. God sets a rainbow in the sky to remind him of his promises to his entire creation. His promise is that he will never again destroy his creation as he had just done in the flood. What does this promise amount to and what is our appropriate response? For it is surely not appropriate to respond to God’s covenant in the sky with the words: ‘Promises, promises’ as if we don’t really believe him. What does God’s promise of an eternal covenant amount to and how can we rely on it? I want to talk about three characteristics that make god’s promise reliable.

Firstly, God’s promise is pure gift. We are perhaps more familiar with the covenants in the Old Testament which are reciprocal. God promises to be our God if we will be his people. If we keep his commandments, he will be loyal to us. But this covenant requires no response on the part of human beings at all. God simply promises to act with unmerited grace to his creation. This story is not about amounts of water or pairs of animals or even rainbows. This story is about the way God deals with his creation. God has great expectations for his world. He will not abandon it but nor will he bludgeon it into submission to his will. The story ‘affirms that God is decisively impacted by the suffering, hurt, and circumstance of his creation. God enters into the world’s “common lot”.’¹ As in Genesis 1-2, ‘God’s creative power was not coercive and authoritarian. Rather, it is invitational and permit-granting. While God wills creation to be turned toward him, he does not commandeer it. So in this narrative, bringing the world to trust and obedience is not done by God’s fiat. Rather, it is done by the anguish and grief of God, who enters into the pain and fracture of the world. The world is brought to the rule of God, but only by the pathos and vulnerability of the creator. The story is not about the world assaulted and a God who stands remote. It is about the hurt God endures because of and for the sake of his wayward creation.’²

¹ W Brueggemann, (1982) *Genesis*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, p 78

² Ibid, pp 78-79

We sometimes think that the story is about Noah's goodness. If it is, then there is not much promise in the story for us. Remember too that within a few verses of the end of the story, Noah disgraces himself. If Noah's goodness is the basis of God's actions, then there should immediately be another flood. No, the story is about God's relinquishing his wrath and his power to dismantle his creation in favor of his mercy and his commitment to his creation. He gave human beings their freedom when he created them and before long all went awry. After the flood, he starts over again but this time, whatever we do with our freedom, he will stick with us as all the painful consequences work themselves out. Paradise is lost. There is no going back to Eden. Instead we live in the real world where God will not intervene to smash evil up. The flood is unrepeatable but this is not because the reason for the flood no longer exists. It is not as if the wickedness of the generation of the flood was greater than that of any subsequent generation. The writer of Genesis makes quite plain that the flood has not improved humanity. Indeed, if human beings 'were to be dealt with according to their deserts, there would be a necessity or a daily deluge.' As has been said: 'If the safety of the ark is only for the most saintly of saints, then we are lost. There is not much comfort for us to draw from the ark. The comfort of the Flood story lies in the promises God makes when the waters have gone, promises whose circles spread so wide that they embrace not only all humanity, but all living things, and the earth itself on which they depend.'³

It is that God has experimented with un-creation and has put it behind him forever. Remember that God's first act of creation was to separate the chaotic waters from the earth, establishing boundaries between the great deep under the earth. 'His second act of creation was to make a vault or dome to the sky, divide the deep into two, and put some of its waters above the dome. His third was to draw up boundaries for the waters left below the dome, thus letting dry land appear and making seas and lakes. Clearly, therefore, by opening the floodgates or windows in the dome here in the flood and by allowing the waters beneath the land to gush forth uncontrollably, God is dismantling his creation.'⁴ The flood is no accident. It is God's response to his already ruined creation. He is sorry he ever made it. Instead of pronouncing it good, he now pronounces it thoroughly bad. But after the flood, he vows to live with his sin-prone creation. Perhaps this is quite difficult for us to deal with. When it is the evil of other people that causes us and ours to suffer, then we tend to want God to step in and sort it out. But when it is our evil that wrecks God's purposes, what then? Well, this story, affirms, all God can do is keep on loving us. In this, he is like the parent or the lover who can do nothing to alter the mindset of a child or a partner who is in self-destructive mode. The only thing God can promise is continued love. God's covenant, God's promise to us is not dependent on our deserving, on our goodness, on our obedience, or even on our faithfulness. It is a pure gift.

Secondly, God's promise is peace-giving. I read from Isaiah chapter 54:9-10:

'This is like the days of Noah to me:

Just as I swore that I will not be angry with you' and will not rebuke you.

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.'

³ Trevor Dennis, (1998), *Looking God in the Eye*, London: SPCK, p 33

⁴ *Ibid*, p 26

Unlike empty promises designed to get someone off our back, God's promises may be relied upon totally and absolutely. And this because his love is immovable. It can be relied upon even if the mountains move. The power of this image for God's unfailing love came home to me recently. During the recent earthquake in China, an amateur cameraman shot some film that was shown on the television news. You could hear the voice of someone frantically crying out: 'the mountains are shaking.' In the Old Testament, mountains are a great symbol of dependability So much so that the word 'rock' is often used as a title for God. But, says Isaiah, knowing the reality of earthquakes, even the mountains may move, but God's love is immovable. I remember hearing the plaintive cry of a former colleague of mine some years ago: 'Whenever I love anyone, I lose them.' She has suffered so much loss that it felt to her that loving was very dangerous. It felt to her that it might be better not to love so that there was no danger of losing someone with all the resultant grief. By contrast. God's promise, God's covenant is one of peace. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, denote wholeness, fullness of life, completeness, security. Nothing else that anyone can promise us can give us peace. But, as Paul assured the Romans, nothing can separate us from the love of God. On what can such enormous confidence be grounded? Upon God's love, that is, his steadfast love, his faithfulness in loving us – no matter what. We affirmed this is our call to worship this morning from Psalm 46 and in verse 2, we read, 'Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.' We can rest in this promise. We can make the appropriate response of trust in God even when all that we thought most secure is shaken to its foundations.

Whatever else is going on in cyclones and earthquakes, it is not God punishing people. For God has vowed never to unleash the forces of chaos again. This 'amounts to a pledge that he will never again seek absolute control of events. He will retain the status, the dignity, the freedom for human beings he first gave them at Creation. He will allow them their power, however they choose to exercise it, and whatever the cost for the rest of his creation. He will live with them, whatever the price he has to pay. (Little did the story teller know that it would one day cost him death on a cross...)'⁵

This takes us to the third characteristic of this covenant. God's promise is passionate. That is, it involves his deep feelings. It is based on love And like all deep love, it costs him something. When the beloved suffer, he suffers. This is the God that we see in Jesus. In the way Jesus lived and died we see a God who lets human beings reject God's love. We see the passion, the suffering, the deep pain of a father whose love for his children cannot prevent them following their own violent way. God does not bargain with us. It is not that sort of promise that is symbolized in the rainbow. 'The flood has effected no change in humankind. But it has effected an irreversible change in God, who now will approach his creation with an unlimited patience and forbearance... . Now it is a tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world This is the key insight of the gospel against every notion that God stands outside of the hurt as a judge.' After the flood, God makes an irreversible commitment. He will never again respond to our sin by destroying us. Instead he will allow himself and all that he loves to be killed. 'What has changed is not anything about humankind or creation or waters or floods. What has change is God. God has made a

⁵ Ibid, p 32

decision about the grief and trouble of his own heart.’⁶ God has bound himself to his creation.

So I ask each of you this morning, what promise has God made to you and what is the sign of that promise? For humankind as a whole, God has committed himself in love and the sign is the rainbow. For those of us who promise to follow Jesus, he has again taken the initiative, regardless of our denials and betrayals of him, and given us a new covenant. And we don’t have to wait until we see a rainbow. We have right in front of us the sign of this promise in the bread and the wine. There can be no more potent expression of God’s promise to us than this. This covenant is unconditional in its grace, in its gift of life and peace, and in its costly love. These are the promises on which Jesus urges to build our life. It is entirely up to us whether we live relying on these promises.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

⁶Brueggemann, p 83