

PROMISES BROKEN, PROMISES KEPT

The Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie, Lent II 2021

Has anyone ever broken a promise to you? If you've been alive for a while, I'm sure the answer is yes. Of course, there are smaller promises and larger ones. "Daddy, you said you'd take me to the park. You *promised!*" There are more significant promises, ones we really count on. "I'll love you forever." When a promise like *that* is broken, it leaves us hurting and disoriented.

We begin to wonder: what did I do to deserve this? Can I ever trust anyone again? How could I have been so naïve? It can take a long time to recover.

We can be just as disappointed by the actions of *groups* we believed in. I think of the aid promised to Haiti in the wake of that devastating 2010 earthquake. It destroyed the capital, Port-au-Prince, killed tens of thousands and left 1.5 million people homeless.

In response, billions were pledged and dispersed – meaning the money left the banks. But only *10%* ever got to Haiti. A public advocate observed, "What we learned is that there is no system in place to track money that has been pledged to a poor country after a crisis. What's really needed is to *reimagine* how aid is delivered."

Most devastating of all may be the promises we *ourselves* break. We make assurances to others and *ourselves* sincerely, in good faith. But sometimes we just "never get around" to doing what we've pledged to do. We may feel *overwhelmed* by what we've promised. We may feel unwilling to make the *changes* our promise brings with it.

So we defer... procrastinate... or just give up. Even when the promise represents our truest selves and deepest dreams.

Over time, these broken promises add up and can crush our spirits. That may be the time to turn to another, more trustworthy Source.

The Bible tells the story of a faithful, loving God. God, who created us and gave us our identity as God's children. God, who never stops reaching out to an obstreperous and unfaithful people. God, whose ultimate sign of love is the presence of Jesus, once on earth and now, right here in our hearts.

Today we hear about a very particular promise God made to Abraham and Sarah: that, despite their advanced ages, they would produce a child together. And not only that, they would be father and mother to multitudes, more than the stars in the sky. And how do they respond? They can't help themselves, they burst into laughter. In fact, the name of the child they produce, Isaac, means "he laughs."

And so Abraham becomes forebear to Jewish, Christian and Muslim multitudes around the world.

But life isn't easy for those who chase God's promise.

Challenges and trials that loom ahead hit Jesus' *disciples* pretty hard. Yes, they have been chosen to share Jesus' ministry, to teach and to heal. But these gifts come with a price: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

This is almost as shocking as Jesus warning of his *own* suffering and death. Peter can't stand to hear any of it. His beloved Teacher must *live*. Jesus must go on to be a *traditional* Messiah, restoring Israel to independence, even glory.

But *Jesus' vision runs much deeper*. Jesus understands safety not in *physical* terms but in radical trust in God. Jesus sees his mission as a *way of life* that stands against religious and social conventions. A way of life that sometimes means trouble. "*Good trouble*," as civil rights advocate John Lewis used to say.

Jesus is not willing to compromise that way of life, even if it means risking suffering and death. He invites us to do the same. Along with the trials, Jesus promises an *opening* into a life of *integrity* and *wholeness* that nothing and no one can take away.

None of this means we won't feel the slights and disappointments that come with everyday living. But the promise means that these hurts won't touch the deepest, most *essential* part of our being.

This promise and this power isn't always *identified* with God. But there it is, upholding those of us struggling to find second and third chances. It's what encourages the high school drop-out to get their GED. It's what motivates people unhappy in their work to take a professional risk. This sometimes *silent promise* allows us to pick ourselves up and move on.

Here's how one woman describes her experience becoming a divorced mother of two young children. For a long time she was trapped in resentment. As she describes it,

“With depressing regularity, I was running through all my emotions of hurt, betrayal, fear, anger, sadness, loneliness, despair.”

She decided to make a conscious change from her self-imposed cycle of negativity. This is how she describes the difference:

“Now that I have let go of my old, tragic ending and focused on my new beginning, I feel hopeful and I've become happier. In my *new* story, I am not carrying around the slings and arrows of old wounds. In this new story, life is rich with possibilities. I feel empowered and optimistic. And life reflects this back to me at every turn.”

Putting ourselves in the hands of life – of God -- we find a center and a grounding that can *withstand* moments of doubt and despair. As we enter into the *fullness* of life, *whatever* it brings, we discover a new way, *our new story*. “Those who *lose* their life will *save* it.”

And *this* promise will *never* be broken.