

Jeremiah 33:1-26: Text: 33:10-22

Introduction:

In today's passage we see God make a huge promise through Jeremiah. It's a promise with a lot of parts, but comes down to this: That Israel, and its supporting structures--the Kingship by way of David and the Temple by way of the Levitical Priests--will persist. The exile that is certain won't negate the promises God made about what Israel would be.

And we've talked so much about this that I could, like, preach a message I've already given during Jeremiah and we wouldn't notice, you know? Embedded in here are the same issues of trust and hope we talked about last week, the same issues of how Jesus relates to the priesthood and the promise of New Covenant that we discussed a week before that.

We could lift up what Peter, Revelation, even Paul in some places does, which is, oh, bring together the "reigning" Kingship stuff with the Priestly stuff that we hear from Jeremiah today into one broad thing. Peter says, "As you come to [Jesus]...the living Stone [he's quoting Isaiah here]—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a temple of the Spirit to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Revelation just calls the Church a "kingdom of priests." And there's no great theological leap, here, because of course we believe Jesus is Priest and Lord, and we Christians are "little Christs," who inherit and live up to the pattern of Jesus himself. Jeremiah made this promise about how God

wouldn't abandon His People, but support them with Kingship and Temple, and the early Church took this Jeremiah promise, saw it all focused in Jesus, and passed it on as a responsibility to us who follow him. It's tidy, really. Theologically clever.

And there's mandates, here, you know? Priests are supposed to act a certain way, do certain things with their time--advocate on behalf of others, bring glory to God--and being royalty bears witness to Divine authority, a Davidic king is one who acknowledges that God is king over them and everyone. So we could talk all about responsibilities that follow from the fact that this promise God makes through Jeremiah has come true in Christ and is still coming true in us.

But. As I reflected on how to make sense of this in a way that didn't just, you know, replicate the last month of preaching, what I wanted to focus on isn't the covenant per se, which is so big, but the promise-keeping. And more specifically, how important it is that we watch what we say.

So this morning we're going to talk about promises and keeping them, just like God did. Straightforward, right? But not easy; we all know that.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

What's a promise?

So.

What's a promise? It's worth asking, right? So often we assume that when we talk about any particular thing we're talking about the same thing.

Let me give us a definition of a promise, just to hold in our minds for this morning, at least.

A promise is an assurance or guarantee that we will definitely do something, or something will definitely happen, in the future. That future can be long way away, or just a handful of heartbeats ahead, but a promise is a guarantee that the future will hold something for someone. When God promises through Jeremiah what he does today, it becomes fully kept through Jesus--way down the line--but also, in small ways, kept just 70-some years later when exile ended and Israelites had been returned to Jerusalem.

When we promise something, we guarantee that something will definitely happen.

And, look: We're not God, so...we can almost never guarantee that something will definitely happen, right?

Any promise we make is provisional, it's provisional. It's really for the present, not the future. It's to assure our hearts or assure the hearts of whoever we're talking to. And so we promise, because, well, everyone wants to be assured, everyone wants a guarantee.

We'll talk more about this basic problem--that we can't control the future--in a little bit. But first, let's talk look at a few of the things that get in the way of us keeping promises.

Getting In the Way: Self-delusion

I come from a family of promise-breakers. This comes out in all sorts of ways--large ways, like divorce--and smaller ways, like the continual expression of good intentions that aren't followed through on.

Good intentions are motivated by a love that doesn't match our capacity. Does make sense? Good intentions are motivated by a love that doesn't match our capacity. God's capacity, which is infinite, was able to keep the promises he made through Jeremiah.

And, honestly, while none of us think we're God, most of us believe that we're more capable than we are. Most of our contexts--family, work, even church--demand from us more than we really are able to give, whether that's in terms of money, or attention, or skills. The expectations of our society are such that if we're not proficient at everything, and utterly competent, we feel like we're less than others even if they don't treat us that way.

A first step in maturity, much less in being a keeper of promises, is simply to recognize that we are not competent at everything, good at everything, or, frankly, as good or as competent as we generally present ourselves as being.

No one has it all together. What lie--and it's a lie the Church has promoted for so long in so many places--but what lie makes us think that we should be able to do everything?

We need to be able to say "I can't do that." Two terrible things happen that I want us to be able to avoid. I don't know which one comes first, where "cause" and "effect" are

in this situation, but here it is: We expect our needs to be met by others in whatever way and timeframe we want. And we expect ourselves to be able to meet other people's needs in whatever way and timeframe we want. This is more than simple people-pleasing, more than dutifulness. This is a negative behavioral system. We feel pressure to preform; we pressure others to preform.

But saying "I can't do that" breaks the system. And maybe it's not "I can't do that." It might be "I don't know how to do that." "Can you help me do that?" "I'd like to do that, but I can't when you need me to."

Self-Delusion: Owning Capacities & Capabilities

When we care about people, we don't want to disappoint them. But we are not able to do everything that people ask of us, for a thousand reasons. We simply don't have the capacity. Our good intentions don't match our ability to do what we've agreed to do, and so our promises get broken. But if we can own our capacities and our capabilities--you know what I mean, right? If we can say "This is what I can and can't do, these are the resources I do and don't have, these are those boundaries in my life that are flexible or inflexible, this is what I am called to and that calling has been affirmed or rejected by others with the Spirit." This is owning our capacities and capabilities, instead of, say, renting or borrowing someone's demand upon our lives. If we can own our capacities and our capabilities, then we can say yes or no, and follow through on it. We can avoid the trap of good intentions. God didn't say what Jeremiah related because God really wished that Israel wouldn't get down during exile. God said what God said because God knew God could do it.

It takes humility not to promise things we can't follow through on. Humility is simply knowing what we are capable of, and living up to that. Some of us are people of enormous talent in one area, while others of us have none in that same area. Some of us are kinder than others. Some of us are wiser than others. Some of us, through our weakness and need, reveal more of Christ and humanity's deep need for grace than any of us ever will. This is why a body is made up of many parts. We need one another. Humility means we both ask for the help we need, and confess our incapability to get done what others wish we could get done.

Self-Delusion:

But this problem of over-estimating our own capability to do something destroys our ability to keep promises. We can't be self-delusional, believing we're more capable than we are. I would point us back again--and again and again--to the one thing we can have no illusions about, which is that we are completely loved, fully and completely, and so...well, if we can't do something, so what.

But it's worth reflecting on the ways we over-estimate our capabilities and capacities, especially the way this might lead us to break promises.

Getting in the Way: Information Gap

Sometimes we break promises simply because we didn't have all the information we needed at the time we made the promise. We don't realize what we don't know until we've tried to keep the promises we've made, and discover all sorts of stuff that, if we had known, we would have never promised.

The most basic information we don't have is what the future holds, of course.

Information Gap: Predictions

But even if the future is not known. It can be predicted. The pattern of tomorrow will, in so many ways, follow the pattern of today. I can nearly promise that Bo will wake up between 6:45 and 7:15 tomorrow morning, no matter what time she goes to bed tonight...but maybe she won't. And the further away from us the future is, the more impossible it becomes for us to think our today will be like the tomorrow way down the road.

Consider a map. Maps are information, you know? A map lays out what is to be expected about where we are going. And broadly, it works: The highway leads west or east, north or south. Columbus is where Columbus always is, and Cleveland and Lake Erie stay put. This is like those firmer things that some of us have in our lives: our families, our homes, our employment. And, of course, when the broad lines of the map are wrong, it can be a mess for us, just as when our families, our homes, our employment get shaken, we do too.

But none of our maps are as detailed as we want them to be; when we need a gas station, we don't care where a national park is. And it's always the locals of a place who know it best, right? It's the locals who have wisdom, not simply information. They know what traffic lights take the longest, which restaurants are the best, which neighbor is the crankiest or the kindest.

And yet, you can never know when a tree has fallen over a road, making it impassable, or a bridge has been washed away, or the power has gone out and every light in a city is a four-way stop, or the gas station didn't get its delivery for one reason or another. There are things maps don't tell us.

The only local in the future is God, who in wisdom can see the way our many choices as people will play out. The future--the stuff out there, ahead of us--its only inhabitant is God. The author of Ecclesiastes writes, in a passage about promise-making, "never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon the earth; therefore let your words be few." God, who is capable of arranging future events, can say things like, "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah." God can make this promise because God can arrange this.

Information Gap:

But we make promises about things that we don't have specialized knowledge about, based on a future we don't know with any great certainty. Our information is limited. And when we find out, as we try to keep our promises, that we can't do what we'd say we do because we either didn't realize how difficult it was, or because some event got in the way, our only choice is to acknowledge our failure, and try not to promise so much again.

And if for some reason we believe we can know everything--because there's an app for it, or we haven't failed yet, or we can always buy expertise, or otherwise--then I think we're back in a situation of self-delusion, and even more liable--if

there are degrees of failure--for the promises we don't keep.

Getting in the way: God's Grace

And it may be the case that a broken promise is a grace. It's definitely the case in some situations:

Maybe when we've been coerced and manipulated and tricked into making promises that are not ours to make, it is a grace when God breaks them for us. I think of children being forced to make promises to act like a parent. I think of slaves being forced to make promises of obedience to their owners. I think of people conscripted into an army, being forced to make promises to kill people. People are often forced into promises of a sexual or violent nature; when God breaks the promises they have made by freeing them from those promises, it's a grace.

Sometimes, we have simply been asked to do things it was unfair to ask us to do, and we agreed for all sorts of unhealthy reasons, and what we need to do is go back to the person we promised, and say, "I am so sorry. I promised to do this for you, but I have to break the promise I made." We may or may not add "It was unfair and inappropriate for you to ask this of me." Or "I only agreed to do this out of deep insecurity." But that's the reason for our apology.

I could remind us of how powerful vows are. A vow is simply a promise we make, almost always to ourselves, for a reason that is self-protective in nature. We vow to be this way, do that thing, and in making that vow we give control over our lives to a desire rather than God. And it is usually a desire that twists inside us until the very thing we wanted to avoid is what becomes true of us. When God breaks a vow

like this, it is a sweet mercy.

God promised a plan for Israel's good, for God's own good. If we remember that Abraham's descendants were meant to bless all creation, God's promise in Jeremiah today is a promise of creational good. But we often plan our own good. James--a book I don't read as much as I should--says:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.

This is a passage that at its most basic is about the way we plan on our own good, our own profit. We form "arrogant schemes." Arrogant, because we believe that we can make them come to pass, and schemes, because they rely on our own cleverness and force of will. When God, today, says, "I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars in the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore" it's a promise that relies on God's cleverness and force of will, made for the good of those who inherit this promise--us--and all creation who will be blessed by them.

We don't know what the future brings; to state with certainty that anything will happen--especially something good for ourselves--is to be losing before we've started.

James is talking about promising a future, selfish good that we muster by our own force of will. And everything about this stands against God's capabilities, character, and power. It may be, when God keeps us from these sort of promises--these selfish, godless--or god ignored--plans, that it's a grace.

God's Grace:

So when God acts to break our promises for us--promises we should have never made, or worse, were coerced into, promises to ourselves that bind us to some terrible sin we sought to avoid, or selfish promises that begin to turn us away from God's will for us--when God acts to break these promises, it's a mercy. It's a gift.

Each of us could reflect on the vows we've made, the clever plans we rely on ourselves to achieve, the promises we've made because someone else un-lovingly coerced us into making them, unfairly asked us to make them, or because we ourselves were so deeply insecure, we agreed to that which we should never have agreed?

Promises & Faith

The future is alive with potentials, maybe's, wishes, imagination.

Let me point out that all of those things are different from faith.

Faith is built up on what we are firmly promised will certainly be true by the only one who can make firm promises, who is God. God can promise because God has all the capacity and capability and wisdom and strategy and whatever else God

needs to get done what God wants done.

If God is infinite in anything, it's capability. If we're deficient in anything, it's capability.

James--again, he's good with word-stuff, which that sentence feels like it could use a little James-ing--he says, to an audience apparently harassed and persecuted,

Today, this was read to us:

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned.

This entire passage is a passage about the way the future relates to our present. The present is fundamentally uncertain except for one thing: Jesus will return. And

“because the Lord’s coming is near”--we would say, maybe, not as near as James thought, but even now “near” as God reckons it--because Jesus is on his way, then we can’t swear oaths. Anything we guarantee could be interrupted. The future may not be consistent with the present.

But we also can’t try to guarantee our promises by something bigger than us, because the only thing in the universe that has the capability to not be shaken is God, and we don’t have the right or the power to claim God will act as our guarantor. God doesn’t sell bail-bonds.

I think, by the way, that the condemnation that can come to us by “swearing by heaven or earth or anything is” is the condemnation that comes to anyone who believes that they can somehow corral a force bigger than themselves to do what they want for them. God isn’t a genie in a bottle. And those stories always end up with the guy who is using power for himself destroyed or chained by whatever he thought he had control of.

Yes’s & No’s:

James says here, “All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” He goes on to condemn any other practice. This isn’t new stuff; James is echoing Jesus, who says, in Matthew 5:

“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make

even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Again, there's the same sense that swearing is this sort of pretend game that we do, where we claim some power that is bigger than ourselves as a guarantee that we'll be true to what we say. And the reason we do this is because the only guarantee that we'll be true to our word is something bigger than us. Even to "swear by our head" as Jesus puts it implies a control over our head that we just really don't have. We can't guarantee the thing will still be attached by the morning.

Jesus--and James, following him--says that our yes's and no's have to stand not on some power outside us--generally God, and if that seems to much, then, you know, something holy God's touched anyway--heaven, earth, Jerusalem, the Bible--but our yes's and no's have to stand on our own proven character. And this just follows from God, you know? God, who has such integrity of character that to speak is to promise.

Our yes's and no's have to stand on our proven character. What this means for is two things: we should keep our promises. When we say yes, we should let that yes become true. When we say no, we should let that no become true. This is always provisional; we cannot promise the future, anymore than we can change our hair color by willing it, and some of us have really willed our hair color to change. We know that gets us nowhere.

But this also means that our promises have to be seated in

our character as Christians. Does this make sense? For those of us who have received the benefits of the promises Jeremiah relayed to God's People, and are seeking to become more like Jesus all the time, the yes's and no's we make are to be ones that people can trust.

They can trust our word because we are trustworthy, and our word--our yes or no--is an extension of that trustworthiness. And our trustworthiness is an extension of our integrity. And our integrity, as Christians, is derivative in every way by the promises God made and kept to our benefit. The deepest irony in swearing an oath by God, trying to leverage God's name for your selfish good, is that in doing it you lose the chance to develop your own integrity, which comes from trusting Him.

Kept Promises:

The fact is that we who walk with Christ walk in the promises of God.

This is why we should keep our promises. And it's a theological reason, not necessarily a personal, experiential one. But we Christians are the people who bear witness to a God who keeps promises. The story of the Bible is the story of God working through humanity to save it; Jesus is a kept promise, embodied, and that's who we are meant to be, too. The power and rights of Jesus have been passed on to us in grace.

I think the reason that Jesus and James are so adamant that we let our yes's be yes, and our no's no, have this sort of integrity that follows through on what we say, is because our word is a witness to God's Word, Jesus. Our trustworthiness

impacts how trustworthy people realize Jesus is.

And of course, for most of us, it's experiences with trustworthy people--sometimes family, sometimes friends, sometimes neither--that have had the greatest impact in the fact that we're Christians now. We live by the Spirit now because someone else kept in step with the Spirit, and we saw in their trustworthiness the trustworthiness of God. We keep promises because God kept promises, and in keeping them, we reveal that God's trustworthy, too.

Conclusions:

It seems weak to say, "Become like God so that others might seek the God you've become like." This reason to keep our promises feels weak to me. I wish it were more persuasive, somehow.

I don't know why. I think I feel this way because, maybe, there's something just a little ridiculous about the promises that we make to God. Fundamentally, each of us who has tossed our lot in with Jesus' has made astonishing promises. Promises of faithfulness, of obedience, of rejecting so much sin and evil while embracing so much holiness and dependance.

There's something a little ridiculous about the promises we make to God--or, there would be something ridiculous about us promising so much, when we are so terrible at keeping promises, if it weren't for the fact that God is so good at keeping them. So good.

Over and over we experience God's promises of grace, of provision, of help when we need it, peace when we need it,

power when we need it--love, made tangible. Each of us carry around a story of God's faithfulness to us in particular, to those we've loved and discovered we love. None of us would be gathered together right now if God had lied to Jeremiah.

We can do so much more than we do to let our yes's and no's be enough, to keep our word--not simply to each other but to God. I mean, we must. We've got to hold the future less tightly, be more aware of how little control we have over it, even if the routines and patterns of our life seem "set in stone" And what is stone, anyway? Everything collapses in the face of time and accident, in the face of pandemic and disease.

Each of us could reflect on the vows we've made, the clever plans we rely on ourselves to achieve, the promises we've made because someone else un-lovingly coerced us into making them, unfairly asked us to make them. We have to think about the ways we over-estimate our own capability to follow through on things. If we have made promises we cannot keep, we may need to pray about unmaking them, and letting our failure--if there is one--be that thing that drives us to make better, wiser promises from here on.

But there are times when we simply need to thank God for His integrity. For His trustworthiness. We need to thank God for the grace that interrupts our failures and gives us second and third and seventy-times-seven chances to keep the promises we make. We need to thank God that he didn't lie through Jeremiah, but promised through him, and, so...here we are now.

