

We broke a promise this week. It is not that we wanted to—we had planned to make the birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese for our youngest grandson but we had not planned on the weather! It just did not seem wise to head out to Bremerton last Sunday with snow, rain and high winds. The promise we had made to celebrate with him was not kept. We were sorry but...we broke a promise.

We are now entering the second week of Advent and as I was preparing for this message I reflected on our not being able to fulfill this promise and how Advent reminds us of God's ability to keep the promises God has made. Isaiah has promised that a branch will grow from Jesse's line. (Ruth 4:17b *"they named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David."*) One commentary notes that when Joseph encounters the angel it has been over 600 years since a descendent of David (Jesse) had led Israel. Now, it is revealed to Joseph that the promise of God through Isaiah is to come true through the woman he is engaged to: *"she will bear a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."* Joseph is of the lineage of Jesse (Matthew 1:6, 16). The child born of the virgin is the Son of God, the fulfillment of the promise, *"a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse"*.

The image in my mind is one of a forest that has been completely destroyed. It is a barren, empty wasteland. If you have seen a forest after a fire you know how the devastation looks. But, if you go back a few months later you will see new shoots of life springing forth. The miracle of life abounds all around. However, there is one stump that seems forever lost, gone, dead. It has long lain dormant with no signs of new life. All there is is the promise that a new shoot will come from this stump. It is still just a promise years and years and years after the devastation. Now we see the promise coming to fulfillment in a teen-age girl, engaged to a carpenter from Nazareth.

There is the promise a new leader, king will arise—one who has been specifically chosen by God and with him will be wisdom, understanding, counsel and might to reign not only over Israel but over the whole world. In essence, though he will be even more than what we could imagine, this new shoot will be God incarnate. The Spirit of God will rest upon him and he with him--he will be God. Here there is a sense of divine mystery—God coming and being among us.

Now any one who has been married for more than a few years knows how couples often begin to think alike. Diane and I will often finish each other's sentences, correctly. I will even get up and start doing something before she asks because I know she is going to ask! It gets scary at times. However the relationship Isaiah speaks of is one that is even closer. Jesus confirms this relationship in John 14:9 *"Don't you know, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.**"*

Isaiah also announces he will come as a righteous judge. He will not judge by what he sees or what he hears, externals. Eyes and ears can play tricks on us. He will not be open to corruption, bribes, there will no lies in him. He will know and judge from the very depth of heart. Yet, he will come with love and an understanding of what it means to be human – incarnate. There will be a depth of love in him that the world will not be able to fully comprehend. The fulfillment of the promise is more than we could ever imagine.

He will also restore the world to the order intended by God. The chaos begun with sin in Eden will be reversed and creation will be as God had originally intended. The lion and lamb will dwell together. Children will play safely in potentially dangerous areas, areas where deadly snakes dwell. He will restore creation to the Eden God had intended. All the breezes will be gentle breezes. All our associations will be those of co-existence and peace. The promise is that God will be in our very midst—a branch of Jesse will bring this to fruition. The promise of God fulfilled.

The words to Joseph are words of reassurance. Reassurance in the purity of Mary and of her explanation of the child she is carrying. *‘Don’t be afraid to take Mary home to be your wife.’* Her story carries validity and the hope and fulfillment of the promise of the prophet. The stump of Jesse is to rise again, a shoot, a small and tender shoot, is springing forth. It will become a “bruised reed” but it represents the greatest gift of God. The branch is of Jesse, a promise fulfilled. Joseph takes Mary and she becomes his wife.

Advent is our reminder of the fulfillment of the promises of God. We again acknowledge that God is the keeper of promises. From time to time it has been popular for married couples to renew their wedding vows. They are again reminded of the promises they have made to one another: the promises made and given. For me Advent is a time when we are reminded again of the promises given. God has fulfilled the promise. God’s word is faithful. God’s promises are sure. It is a time for celebration: A celebration of God’s presence in the world and reminder of the promises still to come.

This past Friday was December 7 – Pearl Harbor Day. Diane and I have been to the place on the island of Panay in the Philippines where MacArthur is said to have returned to the Philippines. You may remember that it was not long after Pearl Harbor that he was forced from the Philippines, but promised the Filipino people he would return. There along the road from Iloilo City to San Jose, Antique, where it hugs the beach is the spot where the famous general fulfilled his promise. Now when he left the Philippines he had no assurance he would return. It may not have been within his control to return, but he did. He kept his promise.

We are in a political season (when are we not!) and candidates are making promises. Now we know that many of the promises made will not be kept. It may not be the fault of the candidate. We live in a democracy and their ideas, as good and noble as they may be, may get voted down. Or other circumstances may arise that will make it impossible for them to keep the promises made. We know they won’t keep many of them. The cynic in us wonders if they are just making them to get elected. Advent is for me the reminder that God is able and will keep the promises He made.

Isaiah 11:10 is a signal of hope to the people. It is a banner to call us to God, the keeper of promises. This is the way of God. This is the promise of God. This is the fulfillment of God’s promise. There in a stable in Bethlehem a child, a son, is born to a poor carpenter and his young wife. Jesse’s branch comes into the world as a tender shoot, a newborn son whose birth goes almost unnoticed by the world. Only a few shepherds who have an encounter with angels come and pay homage (the kings come later). The angels sing but few notice this tender shoot of Jesse. The stump of Jesse has come to life. A miracle has happened, God incarnate, Immanuel, God is with us. And the promise to Joseph and us: *“and he will save the people from their sins.”*