

Promised Hope Inspires Hope-Filled Promises

Hebrews 6:13-20

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Recently, one of the deacons brought a B.C. cartoon strip from the newspaper to our meeting. The cartoon features an ant community. The “houses” in the community are individual ant hills. There is also an “ant church.” The first frame of the cartoon shows the “minister ant” emerging from the “ant church”. The “ant parishioners” are all dispersing to their homes. The second frame shows the minister ant going home. His wife awaits him at the top of their ant hill home. “How’d your sermon on tithing go, honey?” she asks. “Perfect,” he replies. “Ten percent of them stayed awake.”

There are a lot of expectations surrounding the annual stewardship sermon(s). In our church, we have two such specified sermons each year—the first one I preach and the second one a guest preacher. Next week we have the great privilege of having with us Fred Holbrook—one of the more down-to-earth, sincere, genuine and deeply faithful people I know.

Today, however, you are stuck with me. I’m hoping for a higher percentage of folks staying awake than the “ant pastor” in B.C. But we’ll see!

Of course, we all know up front, that the expectation or hope is that you (and I) will not only stay awake but also that you and I would be inspired to ever more faithful stewardship—that we would give 10 percent or more of our income to God via the church, or that we would increase our current giving as we work toward the goal of giving 10 percent or more. We are also hopeful that you and I will consider the ways in which we will share our time, energy, enthusiasm, love and talents. Admittedly, falling asleep right now is suddenly sounding more appealing.

This whole “stewardship thing” can be pretty overwhelming. We are being asked to make a pledge—a promise—that we’re not sure we can keep; a promise we’re not absolutely certain we can deliver on.

All of us are in varying states of financial security or financial distress or despair. Some are hanging on by their fingernails. Some are facing potential job loss or income reduction. Some, on the other hand, are as confident as anyone can be with reliable income, savings and investments. How are people in places both of financial security and despair and everything in between supposed to make a promise on a given Sunday in October about something as unpredictable as money? And, for that matter, how can we be expected to promise our time and our ability to share our talents when we don’t know what the future will hold?

In the Presbyterian Church’s *Ideas* publication, one writer suggests that we need to weekly provide us opportunities to not only give money but also to write down on a card ways in which we hope to give ourselves in ministry in the coming week (not just in the church but also the community, our homes, our schools and workplaces.) The cards are placed in the offering plates just like our tithes and offerings. I think this is a wonderful idea. It’s a weekly reminder that we are called to give ourselves to God. It’s also a reminder that even if we don’t have a dime to put in the offering plate, we can offer ourselves in tangible ways to serve God.

Friends, on our own we cannot really make or keep genuine promises. This is an important time to remind ourselves that all promises are fulfilled only by God's grace. In an effort to keep more than 10 percent of us awake today, let's turn to #2162 in *Sing the Faith*. Let's sing together.

Every promise we can make, every prayer and step of faith, every difference we will make is only by his grace.

Every mountain we will climb, every ray of hope we shine, every blessing left behind, is only by his grace.

Refrain: Grace alone which God supplies, strength unknown he will provide. Christ in us our Cornerstone; we will go forth in grace alone.

Every soul we long to reach, every heart we hope to teach, everywhere we share his peace is only by his grace.

Every loving word we say, every tear we wipe away, every sorrow turned to praise is only by his grace. (return to Refrain). ("Grace Alone" by Scott Wesley Brown and Jeff Nelson, 1998 Maranatha! Music)

Let's take a closer look at our passage from Hebrews. We read of God's promise to Abraham. We first read about Abraham in the Old Testament book of Genesis. Abraham was married to Sarah and to their great sorrow they had never had children. They became old, barren and alone. God calls Abraham and Sarah to move from a familiar place geographically to an unfamiliar place; from certainty to uncertainty. God made a promise to old Abraham and old Sarah: "I will surely bless you and multiply you." The story goes that Abraham and Sarah obeyed God; they packed up their tents and moved. Then, they "patiently endured" as they awaited the fulfillment of God's promises to bless them and to multiply them.

Patient endurance. That's a tough one. It's certainly not something I've mastered as I wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. Well, for the record, Abraham and Sarah weren't always good at it either. You see, having a son was critical for them to be "multiplied" and to become a great nation. Having a son was also seen as the ultimate blessing from God.

For the record, Abraham and Sarah did get impatient with God and didn't always patiently endure. Sometimes they gave up on God and took matters into their own hands. Sound familiar? They gave up on Sarah conceiving a child in old age after years of barrenness. Abraham instead conceived a child with Hagar—Sarah's servant.

I'm grateful that God and the writer of Hebrews have had grace with Abraham and Sarah, whose record was good overall, but not perfect—especially in the patient endurance department. That gives me hope, as I hope it does you.

Bottom line, even when Abraham and Sarah did not keep their end of the deal perfectly, God kept his promises. God did bless them in countless ways and God did multiply them. God gave Abraham and Sarah a son—Isaac. Isaac was in turn given sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob's name was ultimately changed to Israel—the name of the people, the "great nation" God grew from imperfect, old, barren Abraham and Sarah. God kept his promises even when Abraham and Sarah didn't always keep theirs.

So today, I would like to entertain the notion that "stewardship season" is far more about God's promises than about our promises. God is faithful even when we cannot be or choose not to be. Further, it is God's faithfulness to promise-keeping that

inspires us to fulfill our promises, not anything I say today or that Fred says next week. God's promises and God's grace inspire us and empower us to fulfill our promises (yes, imperfectly much of the time) even as we continue to wait and patiently endure the fulfillment of God's promises.

What are God's promises to us? What are God's promises to us individually and to us as the Denbigh Presbyterian Church? This can be very confusing. Sometimes we are convinced that God has promised us financial security, for example. We might think that God has promised us "a rose garden"—an easy life. I would contend that these are not God's promises to us. But I confess I do struggle to know exactly what God's promises are to me and you.

In reading our passage from Hebrews, I began to ponder that perhaps God's promises to us are identical to the promises God made to Abraham. "I will surely bless you and multiply you."

"Yeah, right," you might be saying. "I'm not feeling very blessed today. In fact, I'm at the end of my rope. I'm hanging on by my fingernails."

As hard as it is to accept, some blessings come in strange and unexpected packages. Perhaps even hardships are used by God to bless us in such a way that we can in turn be a blessing to others. Perhaps even hardships are used by God to "multiply" our ministries—now understanding others' more than before, having knowledge and compassion for a particular problem or need someone is suffering through. Blessings are not always immediately identified as blessings. Further, we must remember that God blesses us so that we may be a blessing to others. When we look beyond the "us" to the "others" and how God may use us in ministry, we may discover a blessing in an unexpected package.

We also have this blessing—regardless. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." When everything else falls apart, when no other blessings seem to come, when we are at the ends of our ropes, we have this blessing.

God also promised Abraham that he would "multiply him." How might that blessing apply to us? I believe God promises to multiply us in ministry to grow the kingdom. Every prayer we pray, every tear we wipe away, every word of hope and love, every hungry mouth we feed, every house we build, every dress we make for a needy child, every roadside we clean, every child we teach, every homeless person we shelter and feed, every person we give a Bible or with whom we share the Gospel. Every penny, dollar, or \$10,000 we give, every piece of music we sing or play to God's glory, every person we encourage In these and so many other ways, God is multiplying us.

As the Denbigh Presbyterian Church we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others. We are being multiplied by God to be used in ministry at home, school, work, church, community and world. We need to hold fast to these promises—particularly as we have growing opportunities to expand our ministries and we feel uncertain how we will do it.

We may or may not be able to keep our promises. When we do, it is only by God's grace. The good news is that God will keep his promises—regardless—just like he did for Abraham and Sarah and all who followed.

Today, let us focus on God's promises: I will bless you (to be a blessing) and I will multiply you. May these promises inspire us to make and keep our promises. It sounds deceptively easy.

No, it isn't easy to receive such promises, to believe them, and to live into them. The Christians to whom the writer of Hebrews was speaking were finding patient endurance and keeping the promises before them to inspire them very difficult. The writer says to them and us: Be diligent. Don't become sluggish. Imitate those like Abraham and Sarah who through patient endurance inherited the promise. Finally, he says, cling to hope—the hope of eternal life with God.

The writer uses the metaphor of an anchor in a rather interesting way to make his point. Jesus carries the anchor, not to the depths of the ocean, but to the heights of heaven—through the veil. The anchor is held securely by God. The rope attached is hope. The rope of hope reaches down to us on earth and we cling to the rope called hope. Unlike an anchor with rope attached sent to the depths of the ocean to keep a ship in one place, this rope allows us to freely move about while clinging to the hope. This rope allows us to move freely in ministry and service, through life's ups and downs, backs and forths and twists and turns—with the assurance that at the other end of the rope is the anchor held securely in the hands of God. (Tom Long, Interpretation Commentary on Hebrews). And when we are at the end of **our** ropes, we have the rope of hope to which we can cling and never let go—this rope firmly anchored in heaven.

I love how Eugene Peterson translates this portion of our lesson from Hebrews in *The Message*: “We who have run for our very lives to God have every reason to grab the promised hope with both hands and never let go. It's an unbreakable spiritual lifeline, reaching past all appearances right to the very presence of God where Jesus, running on ahead of us, has taken up his permanent post as high priest for us, in the order of Melchizedek.”

It's now the end of my stewardship sermon. I hope 10 percent of you are still awake.

I also hope that 100 percent of us will remember God's promises. I hope 100 percent of us would invite God's promises to be fulfilled in and through us. I hope that 100 percent of us would cling to the hope which is ours through Christ Jesus.

Finally, I hope that 100 percent of us would say: “God, take 100 percent of me as my offering to you. “All that I have, all that I am, all that I hope to be, I give to you.” Bless me so that I may be a blessing. Multiply me for the sake of the kingdom. Bless the Denbigh Presbyterian Church so that we may be a blessing to others. Multiply us as a church for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.