

SERMON: Keeping God's Promises

TEXT: Isaiah 12

As my home church in North St. Paul, Minnesota, sent me off to seminary, one of the church members said to me, "If this doesn't work out, or if you discover that it's not where you need to be, we will understand. Don't worry about disappointing us; you do what's best for you." He was the only person among dozens of well-wishers in my church family, to say this, to allow for a change of heart or a change of direction. For that reason, it meant a lot to me. He recognized that it would be challenging, that it would require everything I had, that it might prove more demanding than I could handle. He gave me a great gift in that he gave me an out.

As much as I appreciated his sensitive and insightful words, I didn't think I would ever need a way out. Within weeks I found myself barely keeping my head above water in the first foreign language I had ever studied: Biblical Hebrew. With a whole new alphabet, reading right to left, discovering that the first page of the book was at the back. I got through it okay, primarily because it was the only class I took during that eight-week, summer session.

But then came the fall semester, when studying the Old Testament meant unlearning long-held beliefs, like that Moses really *didn't* write the first five books of the Bible, and that there was more than one creation story. It was challenging academically, but more than that, it also shook my solid foundation of faith. That, along with a heavy course load including church history, theology, and pastoral care courses did indeed make me question what I was doing there and whether I could cut it.

Even beyond seminary, there have been plenty of occasions over the past twenty-five years when I dreamed of walking away from the church forever and spending the rest of my life serving ice cream for a living.

Maybe this is not unique to the vocation of ministry. Certainly, other occupations are at least as difficult. But I can only speak of what I know. Indeed, it is no small thing that I have made it this far, and I am grateful to this congregation for celebrating this ordination anniversary with me.

Isaiah 12 – also known as The First Song of Isaiah – has played a major role in my faith formation and in my call to ministry.

*You will say in that day:*

*I will give thanks to you, O Lord,*

*For though you were angry with me,*

*Your anger turned away, and you comforted me.*

*Surely, God is my salvation;*

*I will trust, and will not be afraid,*

*For the Lord God is my strength and my might;*

*God has become my salvation.*

*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*

*And you will say in that day:*

*Give thanks to the Lord, call on God's name;*

*Make know God's deeds among the nations;*

*Proclaim that God's name is exalted.*

*Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;*

*Let this be known in all the earth.*

*Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,*

*For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

I cannot read these words without hearing the melody in my head. It was a favorite anthem of the choir and the congregation in my home church. It was sung

in times of celebration and in times of sorrow, and I can barely hear it or sing it without feeling my throat tighten and my eyes fill with tears. It was also sung by this choir at my request, for my installation as your pastor nearly two years ago. And we will sing it as a hymn following the sermon today.

If you've ever seen the movie, Titanic, you will remember that not only is it the true story of the sinking of this magnificent vessel. It also includes a fictional, but compelling love story between Jack, a drifter and artist who won the tickets to travel on the ship in card game, and Rose, an upper-class passenger who feels trapped in a lifestyle she abhors. Rose survived the disaster, and at 100 years old, tells the story to her granddaughter and some treasure-hunters searching the depths of the sunken ship.

Every time I watch the movie, I get lost in it, completely wrapped up in it. Until the elderly Rose is nearing the end of her story, summing up her feelings about Jack. "He saved me in every way a person can be saved," she said.

With those eleven words, the movie comes to a screeching halt for me. It's not true. Nothing could be further from the truth. I know that we tend to believe this – or want to believe – that one person can save us. It's the way we feel in the

early stages of a relationship, when we're falling in love. It's understandable coming from Rose, then, as she had known Jack only a few days. Had she spent the rest of her life with him, she may have felt differently. Or maybe not. Maybe that's just me.

But my point is that it is dangerous to think that one person, one human being, can save us. Isaiah's proclamation points to a more trustworthy path, expressed in those five words: "Surely God is my salvation."

On the other hand, how do we know the truth of these words, but through the love of God's people?

Listen to this poem titled, "Why?"

*On the street I saw a small girl*

*Cold and shivering in a thin dress, with little hope of a decent meal.*

*I became angry and said to God:*

*"Why did you permit this?*

*Why don't you do something about it?"*

*For a while God said nothing.*

*That night, God replied quite suddenly:*

*“I certainly did do something about it.*

*I made you.”*

As we read from the Gospel of Luke, we are living once again in a time when all the signs seem to point to the end of the world. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.” The passage ends with Jesus telling his disciples, “By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Our faith must endure in these times. But not only endure. Our faith must be active in these times. *God made us* to do something about the terrors and injustices around us. We are the ones responsible for KEEPING GOD’S PROMISES.

After over 2,000 years, the promises we read in scripture can become hard to believe. From Isaiah, Chapter 65, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.... No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall

there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together.”

It’s a beautiful image, to be sure, but some days it seems we are no closer to these promises coming true than when Isaiah wrote of them.

But it is the work of the church to remember and continue to proclaim that God’s promises have been fulfilled through a person. God did do something about it. God made Jesus and sent him to earth. *Jesus* has saved us – and continues to save us – in every way a person can be saved.

And as his disciples, as his church, it is up to us to continue the work of KEEPING GOD’S PROMISES for Christ’s sake and for the sake of God’s kingdom.

Through the church, through God’s people, God has saved me for ministry over and over again. So, I believe in the church. I believe God made us to continue the ministry of Jesus, to do something about the evils and the ills in our world.

Surely God is our salvation. May we trust and not be afraid. With the assurance that God is our strength and our might, may we commit ourselves in every way that we can to continue making God's deeds known, to sing God's praises, to keep God's promises... to the glory of God!

AMEN.