



Honest Promise



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

December 2, 2018
The First Sunday of Advent
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Six hundred years before Jesus was born, the people of Israel faced an existential crisis. The armies of Babylon were rising in the east and marching toward Israel, with the city of Jerusalem square in their sights. It wouldn't be long before the Babylonians breached the city walls, killed hundreds and hundreds of people, leveled the king's palace, and even destroyed the Temple itself, the very heart of Jewish life.

This invasion, and its destruction of Jerusalem, shattered the Israelites and scarred their collective psyche. Everything they had known, socially, economically, and religiously, was gone – their whole way of life ripped away. And, the people of Israel didn't know what to make of it. They couldn't believe it was actually happening, and as a result, they began questioning their relationship with God.

Remember, the Israelites thought they were God's chosen people, and they believed that God had promised them a home, a land they could call their own. This promise went back thousands of years, all the way back to their ancestor, Abraham, and this promise was at the center of the covenant, the special relationship between the Israelites and God. "I will make my covenant with you," God said, "and I will give to you, and your offspring after you, the land of Canaan. And, I will be your God, and you will be my people."

The people of Israel remembered those words, but now, with the Babylonians marching through Jerusalem's streets, those words seemed empty and worthless. Suddenly, everything was all gone – God's promise, the people's future. Their land was being occupied and taken. It didn't make any sense and, struggling to come to grips with what was happening, the Israelites could only wonder: How could this happen? How could God let this happen? We're supposed to be God's chosen people. We're supposed to have special relationship. Has God forgotten about us? Has God forgotten His promise?

In the middle of this turmoil and disruption, the prophet Jeremiah appeared, offering the people of Israel hope and consolation. Despite everything that was going on, God had not forgotten His chosen people, and God had not forgotten His promise. While it might not look like it at the moment, things were going to get better. It was all going to work out all right. One day, God would restore the monarchy of David, and a new king would rule Israel, a king of justice and peace. And, when then happened, when that day finally came, the people of Israel would thrive and prosper. Israel would flourish:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made... In those days and at that time, I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.... and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness."

Like that ancient time in Israel, we also live in an age of disruption. Life is changing all around us, sometimes so fast, it's hard to keep up. The internet has reduced the world to the size of a keyboard and changed the way we shop, get the news, and watch television and movies. Social media has helped us connect with long-lost friends, have life-changing experiences, and fuel social movements, like #metoo, and Black Lives Matter, and the March for Our Lives. And, we all know how the politics in this country have been completely upended.

This past week, former President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State James Baker shared the stage at a forum in Houston, Texas, and together, they lamented the current political climate. As part of the old Washington consensus that favored free trade, democratic values, and a foreign policy built on alliances with like-minded countries, the two men openly wondered about where it had all gone wrong, how it had all changed, and why things were so different now.

On top of all that, though, a lot of us in this room have experienced our own trouble and turmoil. I look around this morning and see people who have struggled with issues at home, at work, at school. I see people who have dealt with pain, and illness, and loss. I also notice the people who aren't here, the people in our community who have died. Many of us have been carrying heavy burdens, dealing with grief, handling sorrow. We may not talk about it. We may not want others to know. But, it's been a tough time.

So, like the people of Israel, we're all looking for a little hope and consolation. We want to know that God is still with us, that God has forgotten about us, that in the middle of all our trouble, in the middle of all we're going through, God is here and everything we read in the Bible and everything we hear in church is true. We want to know that everything's going to be okay.

The problem is: when you live in an age of disruption, when life as you know it is being upended, it's hard to know what to believe. It's like the rug has been pulled out from under you. That's why so many people are cynical and skeptical these days, about our institutions and organizations, about politics and religion, about life and about God. We don't know who to trust anymore. We don't know what is real anymore. Suddenly, the truth is all relative, and so maybe what we read and what we hear isn't right, maybe it isn't valid, even what we read and hear about in church. Maybe it's all just "fake news."

Yet, even in times like these, there are still people we can turn to and count on, people who will be honest with us and truthful with us.

Many years ago now, back when my wife, Susan, and I first started dating, we both knew pretty early on that this was it, that this was the person we would spend the rest of our life with, but still, after months and months of being together, neither of us had said those three important words: I love you.

Susan started dropping hints that she wanted me to say it, but I was young, and I had never said those words before to anyone beside my parents. So, the hints kept coming, more and more frequently, until finally, one night, we were walking home from the movies, and Susan was saying nothing but hint, hint, hint, and so, I stopped. I looked her straight in the eyes, and I said, "I love you."

And, she looked me right in the eyes and said, "Honest, promise?"

So, I said, "Honest, promise."

"I love you, too" she said.

And, to this day, whenever we want the other person to know that we're genuine, and serious, and telling the truth, that we're not kidding or messing around, but what we're saying is real, we say, "Honest, promise."

Jesus is God's "Honest, promise."

Thousands of years ago, Jeremiah spoke words of hope and consolation to the people of Israel, and today, we hear those same words. They're a promise that in the middle of the night, dawn is about to break, joy is about to come, and, a branch will sprout. They're a promise that Jesus is on his way, bringing new life and new possibilities, a promise that things are going to get better, and everything will be all right, for unto us a child is born is his name shall be Immanuel, which means God is with us.

That's the promise of Advent. It's the meaning of this season: Honest Promise.

Amen.