

Sermon for Sunday, December 3, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"THE PROMISE KEEPER"

Isaiah 7:10-14

Malachi 3:13-4:6

Text: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Isaiah 7:14

Do you keep the promises you make? I suspect most of us try, but if you are as I am, frequently you find yourself failing. The other day when I was in the store, a mother was dragging her protesting little son by the candy counter as he dug in his heels and cried, "But Mommie, you promised!" Sometimes we are simply unable to fulfill our promises. We think we will be able to do something, but when the time comes, we find that we do not have the capabilities to carry through on what we have said we will do. Sometimes we don't keep our promises because we discover they were not wise. There have been times I have promised my children something, but when the time came to deliver, I have realized that what I promised was not the good or wise thing to do.

The Bible tells us three things about God. First, it tells us that he is a God who makes promises. The Bible is literally full of the promises of God. Sometimes in a small group sharing session, one of the things we will do is go around the circle and ask each person to share some promise of God. And it is amazing how many we can remember when we begin to think about it. An interesting thing you might do when you get home today is to take your Bible and open it at almost any place and see how many promises of God you can find on a page. Yes, God is a God who promises. He loves us and cares about us and because he does, he wants to do things for us.

But the second thing the Bible tells us about God is that his promises are always the best thing for us. The things that God wants to do for us are always the wise thing, the best thing, the good thing. The Bible tells us that God looks on our inward hearts and therefore he knows what our real needs are. He never makes a mistake about what is best for you or for me. And the Bible says that the future is in God's hands. Therefore, changing times, changing circumstances, do not make God's promises become unwise. No, whatever God promises is always the very best thing for us. It is always the wisest thing for us.

So God is a God who makes promises and those promises are always the best thing for us. But the Bible tells us a third thing about God, for it tells us that he is also a promise-keeper. God always delivers. God always fulfills his promises. God always does what he says he will do.

In the first three chapters of the Bible, we are told how God created the universe. We are told how God made all things and then, as the crown of his creation, God made you and me. He made us to love us and for us to love him in return. But you know the story of what happened. Man responded to God with unlove. He responded with rebellion and disobedience and he said "no" to God. As a consequence our relationship to God was broken and we became subject to sin and death. But right there in the very beginning God made his very first promise of a Redeemer. In the 15th verse of Genesis 3, we read, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." If you have a Harper's Study Bible, you will find this explanatory note on verse 15 at the bottom of the page where the author writes, "This is the first promise of a Redeemer. The conflict of the ages is predicted--a conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. The Redeemer will finally bring ruin to Satan and his seed although in the process Satan will bruise the Redeemer(as took place at Calvary)..."

Yes, God is a God who promises. And in the very beginning he promises fallen mankind a Redeemer. He promises one who will come and restore our fellowship with God, who will heal our brokenness, who will restore our alienation. And this promising God is one who always does the wise thing, the good thing for us. This means that Jesus--that promised Redeemer--will be God's best. It will be the very best that God can do for us. And it means that God is a promise keeper. He will do what he says. He will fulfill his promise.

Actually, the story of the Bible is the story of how God fulfilled that first promise of a Redeemer. When God chose the Jews to be his people, there were many times when they must have wondered about God's promise. When the Jews were made slaves in Egypt they must have wondered, "where is God's redeemer?" When they stood trapped on the banks of the Red Sea, they cried out for God's Redeemer. And through the centuries that followed, time and time again, they wondered if God was truly a promise-keeper. During that troubled period when Isaiah lived, disaster threatened the kingdom of the Jews and God renewed his promise of a Redeemer, "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel..." But the centuries continued to go by, and still no Redeemer. At last we come to the final book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi. And there, on the very last page of that final book, we hear the promise again, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings..."

Thus, the Old Testament came to a close and still no Redeemer. For four hundred long and bitter years, there is silence. Between the last page of the Old Testament and the first page of the New Testament, there is a long history of trouble and disaster for the people of God. In the end, there is only a small remnant of God's people left. Surely they must have wondered about God who had promised so much and who seemingly had given so little. Then we turn the page and we come to this: "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." Yes, God is a promise-keeper! And there on that first page of the New Testament we read these words, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel! (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.'" Yes, God is a promise-keeper!

Did God do the wise thing? There were those who thought not. There were those who thought the wise thing would be a great king, a great political leader, but God sent a baby, born in a stable. There were those who thought the wise thing would be a great military genius with a powerful army. Instead, God sent an infant who, at the end, had an army of eleven frightened men and a few faithful women. There were those who thought the best thing would be pomp and splendor with the homage of the nations at his feet, but God sent a child with only the animals and the shepherds to adore him. There were those who thought his memorial should be a mighty empire and his sign should be that of a powerful septer, but God thought his sign should be a cross which was foolishness to men, but which turned out to be the wisdom of God.

You see, twenty long centuries have come and gone since the day God kept His promise. Nations have come to power and fallen to the dust. Mighty armies have marched, great navies have sailed. Mighty men have risen to power and greatness. Great inventions have been discovered and great deeds have been done. But all of these nations, those armies, those navies, those leaders, those inventions, those deeds have not affected mankind as much as that one single man. And the greatest event in all those centuries is symbolized by the cross on which that man died. Yes, God is a promise-keeper and what he promised is always the best.

There is something we can learn from this about God's promises. God's promise did not come when the Jews thought it ought to come. Do you remember that line from "Fiddler on the Roof" when the Rabbi is asked, "Wouldn't this be a good time for Messiah to come?" I suppose in every age the Jews asked that question. But St. Paul writes that when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son. And that phrase "fullness of time" means the "right moment", the "best time", the "appropriate instant." And that's the way it is with God's promises. He makes a promise, he keeps his promise, and it will come - not when we think best - but at exactly the right moment.

And a second thing we learn is that it will be the very best. We may think we know what we need and we may know what we want in answer to our problems, just as the Jews thought they knew what God's answer should be. But God's solution, God's answer to our needs, will always be the very best. It may not come in the form we expected or the way we wanted or the way we hoped it would, but God's promise fulfilled will be the very best for us.

Many of you have taken God's promise seriously when he said that if we brought our tithes to Him he would open the windows of heaven and bless us. Well, God is a promise-keeper. He will bless you beyond what you ask or hope. It may not come when you expect it or the way you want it, but God's blessing will be the very best for you. Yes, He is a promise-keeper.

I suspect there are many here this morning who have not yet trusted God completely. You have not been willing to surrender your lives and to surrender what you have and what you are to Jesus. You have not been willing to let go and to give God control of your life. Why not? Is it because you do not need a Saviour? Well, we both know better than that. Is it because you don't trust him? Is it that you really don't believe he will do for you what he says he will do? Today is the first Sunday in Advent, that season when we celebrate the fulfillment of God's promise that he would send us a saviour. You see, Jesus is the proof that God is a promise-keeper.

The Gospel of St. John tells the Christmas story in a way that is different from Matthew and Luke. John tells it this way, "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." And then John tells us of this incredible promise. "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God..." Yes, if you receive Jesus, you have the power to become a child of God. That's God's promise and God is a promise-keeper.