

“God Promises the Unexpected”

Isaiah 7:10-14

Sermon for Advent Midweek Service 2021; December 1, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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Advent leads us to consider God’s promises in Christ. It also prepares us for the fulfillment of those promises at Bethlehem, during Holy Week, and in Christ’s coming again.

In light of God’s promises, let’s ponder this question: should everything God does be consistent with the way things happen naturally, according to the laws of nature, according to the ordinary course of human life? You and I live in a time when this question has been answered “yes,” most emphatically. It is the modern view of things. In the modern view, everything must happen in a manner consistent with one set of laws, the laws of nature as determined by science. Nature is bound by those laws. God must also be bound by those laws. There can be no inconsistency. But this comes into conflict with promises God makes in Christ that don’t conform to the ordinary course of nature. The nature of a promise, however, tells us to expect the unexpected. We consider how this can be.

There are many promises God makes that we could talk about. A good example is the promise of Christ’s birth in Isaiah 7:14. It says, “The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and give birth to a Son and shall call His Name Immanuel.” This is truly a promise. It is something God promises to do in the future from when the promise was made. It is something that is good for us and for our benefit since it is the promise of Immanuel, God with us. Should we expect this promise to be consistent with the ordinary course of nature? The reason why we raise this question is because many people and theologians have said that the word be translated as “virgin” here should not be translated as “virgin” because that is not possible according to the ordinary course of nature.

Let’s consider this. I suspect that you all have promised to do something for your children or grandchildren at least once. Let’s say you promise to get a bike for your child or grandchild for their birthday or Christmas. Will that bike just happen in the natural course and order of things? Will it just simply materialize on your child’s birthday or at Christmas according to the laws of nature? Will there be a bike there for your child or grandchild just as the sun comes up in morning, just like the trees produce leaves and fruit, just like the seasons turn, and gravity causes things to fall? Can you just dig a bicycle out of the ground fully formed and ready to go? Do bicycles grow on trees?

Obviously not. Bicycles don’t grow on trees. They don’t just pop out of the ground. But this is to say that they don’t happen in the ordinary course of nature. Indeed, most things that humans do do not occur in the ordinary course of nature.

So then we recognize an interesting thing. It is the nature of a promise to promise something that will not take place in the ordinary course of nature. As a result, human reasoning in the natural sciences cannot account for promises. Yet making promises is something we do as human beings in human society time and time again. It is something we are very familiar with.

So unless we are going to deny the reality of making promises, and so many other things humans do, we have to say this. Science certainly has its important place in life. But science cannot account for and determine *everything*. Science cannot determine everything in God-given human activity. Certainly, it cannot rule over God. It has no authority to be judge and jury when God promises things that do not occur in the ordinary course of nature.

So unless bicycles and clothes and video games and cell phones and music and toy cars and trucks and, so on, that parents and grandparents promise to give to their children and grandchildren; unless such things grow on trees or just pop out of the ground or just materialize in the natural course of things, just like the sun coming up or the apple falling from the tree, then promises involve doing something that does not occur in the ordinary and natural course of things, and science cannot account for this. But the nature of a promise can account for it.

Since this is true on a human level, then we should not expect anything less from God, especially when it comes to providing salvation for us. Since God's promises do not have to be consistent with the ordinary course of nature, then God can do something about sin and death. Since God's promises are not limited by the ordinary course of nature, then God can promise to be with us and identify with us in our struggles and pain in a wonderful way.

So we thank God this evening that when He promises, He promises the unexpected. We can also thank God that we can learn about this from the nature of a promise even on a human level. If when a parent promises something to a child that does not occur in the natural course of things, then we can expect much more when our heavenly Father makes a promise; it will be unexpected indeed. And it will be great, and glorious, and grace, life, joy, and peace.

So God promised that the virgin will conceive and bear a son and His Name shall be called Immanuel, God with us. Wait a second. Virgins don't just conceive. That's impossible. We know this from the course of nature. That could not possibly be what God actually said and certainly not what God meant.

Ah yes, but understanding the nature of a promise and the limitations of science leads us to say, "wait, not so fast" to ordinary human judgments according to human reasoning according to the laws of nature. God has made a promise. It is the nature of a promise to promise something not expected in the ordinary course of nature. This nature of a promise has no limits when the promise is made by God. We have surprise, wonder, awe, thanksgiving, and joy that God promises to do the unexpected, the natural course of things notwithstanding.

What joy it is then that God promises to give us a sign that He is with us by giving us a Son, like us, who is God with us. God with us is His name. Therefore, His nature is God with us. He Himself is our faith and assurance that God is with us. What joy it is that this Son was then conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary according to the promise and came into our world as one of us.

And what joy that this Son has another name, Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins (Mat. 1:21). In Him, His death is an atoning death. In Him, life arises out of death. In His Name, there is the declaration and the promise that our sins are forgiven with God. And He places this forgiveness for us in the declaration of forgiveness and in His body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Sins are not forgiven in the ordinary course of things according to law. The ordinary way according to the law is condemnation, and judgment, and punishment. Thus, if all we had was the ordinary course of nature, then all we would have is sorrow, and the pain of guilt and remorse; the why did I or he or she or they do that. And this would be absolute, with no hope of any reversal or any real remedy in God's kingdom. And then all we would have is the expectation to get angry, and, then, expect revenge.

There is nothing expected or ordinary about Jesus accomplishing forgiveness. There is nothing expected or ordinary in Jesus applying forgiveness to us here in His authorized speaking and preaching and Sacrament. Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins is not ordinary according to the laws of nature.

In closing, consider this promise from Jesus: “If anyone believes in me, as who I am for you as Immanuel and the Savior from sin and death, I will raise him or her up on the last day” (John 6:40). If all we have is the ordinary course of nature according to the laws of nature and human experience, then all we ultimately have is death. But Jesus promises eternal life and resurrection on the last day. He promises life conquering death; hope overcoming despair; sorrow, grief, and hopelessness giving way to joy beyond words and in living reality. These things do not occur in the ordinary course of nature, but according to His promise. And so they will be for us and for those who hope in Christ as Immanuel and Jesus. Thanks be to God that it is the nature of God’s promises to promise the unexpected in Jesus. This is light shining in darkness, and it is life, joy, peace, and hope in Him. Amen.