

“God Is Able to Do What He Promises”

Genesis 17:15-21; Luke 1:26-38

Sermon for Advent Midweek December 8, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

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During these Advent Midweek services, we are taking a look at the nature of a promise and things that are essential to it. We want to unpack the things that hold true for the promises God makes to us in Jesus.

One of these essential things is that when a person makes a promise, they are communicating to the other person that they are able to do what they promise. When a person says “I promise to do such and such,” they are communicating to the other person that they can do it, with the result that they bring about an expectation in the other person that they are able to do it.

So let’s say that Joe promises to build a house for Jerry. When Joe does so, among other things, Joe is communicating to Jerry that Joe is able to build the house. Joe is communicating that Joe has the know-how and resources to build the house. Joe is communicating that he has the time to build the house and the physical strength, ability, and skills that are also needed. Joe is communicating this to Jerry to bring about the expectation in Jerry that Joe is able to build the house.

For Jerry’s part, Jerry is relying on Joe having such capabilities because Joe has made the promise, that is, Jerry is trusting Joe. Jerry ends up believing that Joe is able to do what he has promised. So Jerry says to Joe, Okay, Joe, go ahead and build a house for me and I will pay you to do it.”

We take these things very seriously when someone makes a promise to us. In fact, we take it so seriously that if the person who makes a promise turns out not to be able to do what they promised, we consider that person to have been lying to us. We also consider that person to have broken our trust. Integrity, character, and trustworthiness are wrapped up in making promises. Indeed, the making and keeping of promises is a vital part of human relations.

If these things are true among human beings, they are even more true in God’s promises to us. When God makes a promise, God is communicating that He is able to do what He promises. In so doing, God is calling forth trust from us. And here is an amazing thing, in making a promise God is putting His character at risk on our behalf. All of this is wrapped up in the promises God has made concerning the Christ.

A couple of promises come into sharp focus for us this evening, though we could talk about many others. These are the promises to Abraham and Sarah and to Mary, the mother of our Lord.

We pick up the story of Abraham when he is 100 years old and his wife Sarah is 90. Sarah has not yet been able to have children. And now it seems it is way beyond any hope for that sort of thing.

Yet, here comes God, and He makes a promise. God speaks, and what He says can be put into the form “I, God, promise such and such to you Abraham.” What God said is this: “I will bless Sarah and give you a son by her” (Gen. 17:16 ESV).

Abraham laughed at this and tried to give God an “out “that would save God’s face or reputation from making such a silly and potentially embarrassing promise: “Oh that Ismael might live before you,” Abraham said (Gen. 17:18 (ESV). But God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac” (Gen. 17:18 ESV). God is serious about this.

But how can an old man and an old woman produce a son? This has never been heard of before in the annals of the human race. God must be crazy. Who could believe such a thing?

Yet, by making the promise God intends to communicate that He is able to do what He is promising. He overcomes Abraham's laughter and objections and what seems like a quite reasonable suggestion for saving God's face. In making the promise God was communicating to Abraham that God is able to do what He said He would do, and He is calling forth faith from Abraham. So God says, "Sarah shall bear [a son] to you at this time next year" (Gen. 17:21 ESV).

And so it was. Sarah got pregnant. Isaac was born right on schedule. God demonstrated that He has the know-how, the power, the resources in Himself, and the skills and ability to bring it about. And the bringing this about means bringing into existence a human life and accomplishing all of God's purposes through that life. So in His promises, we embrace God as Creator, faithful, powerful, and full of grace and love, all at once.

God also has the time, and He has the time in the most profound sense. He sovereignly oversees and superintends time to bring about the fulfillment of what He has said He would do. Time is in His hands, and He is working out His purposes in and through time, even though this passes without our noticing. But we know this by faith in and through His promises that ultimately have Christ as the reason, the center, and the fulfillment.

So Isaac was born according to promise. There was laughter from Abraham and Sarah; Isaac's name means laughter. But this time it was not the laughter of "Yeah, right, whatever you say God," but the laughter of joy deeper than words and thanksgiving at the wonder, grace, power to do such a good thing, and faithfulness of God, at the birth of their son.

Now God comes again making promises. This time, God sends the angel Gabriel to Mary the mother of our Lord. Here God promises something even more stupendous. Isaac and even John the Baptist were miracle children, no doubt about it. But here is an even greater miracle; a greater wonder to bring us into worship of God: "You Mary shall conceive a son in your womb and give birth to him. You shall call his name Jesus. He will be called 'Son of the Most High.' He will sit on David's throne and reign forever. In other words, your Son shall be the promised Messiah, the hope of all the ages; the hope of all mankind in overturning the fall, and the death, and the curse brought about by Adam; the One who can destroy Satan and his work and all evil. There shall be no end to His kingdom. Death and the ruin of sin shall not overtake Him and His reign" (Luke 1:31-32).

You can imagine how stunned Mary must have been, stunned not only by the sudden appearance of an angel. Stunned also, and even more so, by what the angel told her about how she would become pregnant and who her Son would be. Son of the Most High. Son of King David. An eternal kingdom, not subject to the ruin of sin and the end that is death. Eternal in holiness. Eternal in life. Eternal in redemption and peace. The hope of all who want this reality in redemption and forgiveness.

She must have been strengthened by the Spirit to be able to keep her wits about her and catch up so that she could ask a pertinent question: "How can this be since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). God is communicating to her by making the promise that God is able to do this. But there is a factor that requires some explanation. Mary is not married and has not had relations with a man. So conceiving a Son presents a difficulty.

The upshot of Gabriel's response to her is: God is able to do what He promises. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35 ESV).

We talked last week about how God's promises involve doing something that we would not expect in the ordinary course of nature. Here it is. The virgin shall conceive and bear a son. Today we give thanks and praise that when God makes such a promise of the unexpected, He is able to do what He promises. And So it is. Jesus, this son, was born in Bethlehem according to God's word. All the promises God makes to us of redemption and life, eternal life, will come to pass.

And God's ability to do what He promises in Jesus Christ shines forth in in eternal light in two magnificent ways. One way is to create the human flesh of this Son in Mary's womb by the operation of the Holy Spirit, without the aid of a man. It is the operation of the Creator in grace and truth. The second is that this Son of flesh in Mary's womb is not only the Son of flesh, that is, the descendent of King David (Rom. 1:3), but also the Son of God. In God's promise we are given and embrace God's Son come among us in human flesh appearing, in human flesh revealing and speaking and doing God's work; in human flesh atoning and rising from death; in human flesh sitting on the eternal throne to be the eternal hope of all mankind.

So as we consider the nature of a promise in Jesus, we see Gabriel's word fulfilled for us: "nothing shall be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37 ESV). And in the promise of this Son of Mary, Jesus our Lord, this faith is called forth and empowered, this faith confessed by Mary: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38 ESV). By this faith we are regarded as righteousness in the sight of God, where this word is the word of promise wrapped up in Jesus. And in this faith, we receive Him, and with Him, everlasting life, joy, and peace, because in Him, we receive God.

So we thank God this evening for what He shows us in His promises: God is able to do what He promises, and He will do it. In this faith, we are His and live in His kingdom forever, as the redeemed of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.