

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“Promises are like pie crust, thin and easily broken.” That is an old expression that provided the title of a poem by Christina Rossetti, the author of *In the Bleak Midwinter* that you might have heard us sing at last week’s cantata at Good Shepherd. The poem, like the expression, voices doubts about the promises we make to one another, especially our professions of undying love in the passion of our youth. But the fact is, our lives are full of promises. They are part of what makes living together with other people possible. My marriage to Helen is based on promises we made to each other 38 years ago to share our lives and to be faithful to each other. We have a house because a bank was willing to lend us money to buy one, based on our promise to make monthly payments for 15 to 30 years. And then there are promise people make to us. Our financial advisor is a fiduciary, which means he has signed a document promising to manage our money in the way that best serves us. I had extended warranty on my car that promised to pay for most repairs until I hit a certain milage. My doctor has a medical degree promising that he is able to properly evaluate and treat any illnesses or injuries I might have, and to care for my general health. I could go on.

Today’s gospel reading depends on a backstory that is full of promises, but promises of a different kind – promises made by God. The first 38 verses of Luke that precede our Gospel reading tell two different stories of God making promises that are now brought together. God’s agent in both of those first two stories was a messenger, an “angel,” named Gabriel. Gabriel is a Hebrew name, and Hebrew names in the Bible often carry meanings that are important to the story they appear in. Abraham’s name, for instance, means “Father of a multitude.” That’s the name God gave him after promising to make of him and Sarah a great nation. The name Gabriel means, “God’s mighty one,” establishing that he is just who he says he is. Gabriel comes to a priest named Zechariah, which means “Yahweh remembers” to tell him that God has not forgotten him. You see, Zechariah is an old man, and his wife Elizabeth is an old woman. I’ll tell you what Elizabeth means in a minute. The two of them have not been able to have children. We don’t know why they couldn’t have children, but we know that Zechariah has been praying for a child because Gabriel comes to tell him that his prayer has been answered. Elizabeth will at last conceive and bear a child. But Zechariah has trouble believing this because he knows that they are now too old to have children. You know the rest of the story. Zechariah is struck mute, unable to speak until the child is born. But then when Elizabeth learns that she has indeed become pregnant, she recognizes this as the work of God. Elizabeth, by the way, means “my God promises.” So “Yahweh remembers” and “my God promises” are going to have a child.

In the other story that precedes today’s, Gabriel brings a message to Elizabeth’s young cousin Mary. He comes with a message that Mary will conceive and bear a son. Mary is mystified. Like Zechariah, she has trouble believing this. Her reason for doubt is that she has not engaged in the activity that is the usual precursor to conception. But where Zechariah was silenced for his doubt, Mary gets a second chance. This will be the work of the Holy Spirit, Gabriel tells her, and her son will be the long-promised Messiah whose kingdom will last forever. And then Gabriel tells Mary about her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy. So Mary says, “let it be,” or in the words of a hymn in the purple book, “tell God I say yes.”

That’s where our reading today picks up and brings these two stories together. Mary did not voice any further doubts to Gabriel, but she must surely have still been pondering his visit

and his words as she rushed off to see Elizabeth. As when anything so strange and surprising happens, she must have wondered if she had merely imagined the whole thing. But what happens when these two pregnant relatives meet is, I think, instructive for us in our own lives of faith.

First, the events that conspired to bring these two women together show us that God works in unlikely and surprising ways. The first chapters of Luke show God confounding expectations and making women the main characters in a culture dominated by men. But it's not only as mothers that they are valued, though certainly their motherhood is essential to their roles. But they also speak, and they think, roles usually reserved for men in ancient literature. And they prophesy. How did Elizabeth know that Mary was pregnant? How did she know that the child in Mary's womb was "her Lord?" Maybe that was a part of Mary's greeting that just wasn't written down in the text. Maybe. However she knew, she knew. And she proclaimed what she knew in this morning's psalmody, the Magnificat, which the choir also sang two weeks ago in Vivaldi's setting. Though our text says that Mary spoke (or sang) those verses, there are some ancient biblical manuscripts that say that it was actually Elizabeth who spoke them. And in context, it seems to make a little more sense for her to speak those words than Mary, because the Magnificat is very similar to the song of Hannah in the book of Samuel. Like Elizabeth, Hannah was a childless woman who bore a son in her old age. Whoever it was, though, it was a woman whom God inspired to utter those prophetic words.

Second, Mary's visit to Elizabeth models for us what it means to be a community of faith. As I said earlier, Mary must still have been pondering the angel's visit and wondering about his message. Elizabeth's words to her, her blessing of Mary and her unborn child, to say nothing of the unmistakable physical reminder of Elizabeth's extraordinary pregnancy, must have been very encouraging for Mary. And if Mary is indeed the one singing the Magnificat here, Luke seems to be indicating that Elizabeth's encouraging words were a big help to her in continuing to trust God's promise.

Third, the words of prophesy inspired by this meeting are a powerful demonstration that God's promised blessing and favor are not private matters meant only for a select few, but are part of God's project of turning the whole world upside down, of righting the wrongs we inflict on one another, and of reevaluating the worth and humanity of all people, bringing down the might and lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry and putting the richly-fed on a diet.

I started this morning by talking about all of the promises that are part of living in the world, promises we make, and promises made to us. All of those promises are susceptible to being broken. I could lose my income and not make the promised payments on my house. The car dealership could find loopholes for not paying for promised repairs. My doctor could misdiagnose me. The takeaway for us this morning as we approach the end of the Advent season swimming in a sea of promises, is the assurance that even if everything else fails, even if all seems lost, as it seemed to Elizabeth at the beginning of Luke, there are promise that we can count on. The promises of God in Jesus Christ are trustworthy. God is at work in the world and in us to make right what is wrong, to heal what is broken, and to bring reconciliation and peace where there is division and discord. We gather in community like Mary and Elizabeth to bless each other with our presence, to encourage one another to trust God's promises, and to remind each other that God's promises and God's blessing are not only for us, but for the world God so loves in Jesus Christ. May God make us faithful to those life-giving tasks, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.