

The Promise Behind the Promise

Psalm 91, Psalm 146

Psalm 91 reads in part:

Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you
For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.
With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation. (Psalm 91: 9-12, 14,16)

Most of us who have experienced much of life will look at promises such as those in Psalm 91 with feelings that at least border on a healthy skepticism. This material is part of the *Wisdom Literature* of the Bible, a predominant philosophy widely taught in biblical times. Essentially, the teaching was that being healthy and wealthy was a sign of being blessed by God while being poor or sick or even female was an indication of being forsaken by God. In many ways, this belief is still widely held today, at least at some level.

It may be true, as Jesus and the prophets said, that God is on side of the poor and oppressed, but most of them are still poor and oppressed. Sometimes we are, too—lonely or afraid or suffering or in pain. Just where are we with God and where is God with us? Surely the promise of God is not that simple—that having faith or obeying the 10 Commandments or going to church will result in our having happiness, wealth, and a long life. So what is the real promise of God concerning how we live and believe and act? What is the promise behind the promise?

Today is the third in a series of sermons titled “Why Should I Follow Jesus?” Through this series, I am sharing at some of the reasons for my faith--why I choose, on my life journey, to follow Jesus. The first reason was “joy.” The second reason is the “promise of abundance.” Today’s third reason only becomes visible when we look beyond promises of ancient wisdom -- long life, no suffering, etc. It is a promise that lies beyond the usual promises of pretty much any of our world’s religions. It is a promise to which all religions, faiths, and philosophies actually point. I follow Jesus because he showed me what is true about life, what is true about what underlies the universe.

You’ve no doubt heard of the famous Faustian bargain of selling your soul to the Devil. Now I have not done that, and imagine you have not either, but I’m aware of some bargains I have made with God: “I’ll be good and you be sure nothing catastrophic happens.” “I’ll go to church and praise you, and you bless my life.” Or even “I’ll follow the rules and you promise not to zap me!” I’m guessing most of us make or have made some bargains with God.

For many Christians, the decision to follow Jesus was kind of a bargain. Some call it fire insurance: a desire to assure a heavenly afterlife—eternal paradise--and avoid the consequences of eternal punishment. In fact, the explicit promise of Christian faith, as most people are introduced to it, is the assurance of heaven and the avoidance of Hell. You get a guaranteed reservation in heaven and fire insurance just in case, all for identifying yourself as a following of Jesus. And other faiths do the same.

There is so much to talk about in terms of heaven and hell, what they are and what they represent, but that is not the subject today. (I have written about both heaven and hell in sermons and have two chapters in my upcoming book about them. There are some problems I see with this scenario. First, this whole idea of a bargain with God strike me as much less than

the intimate relationship I see promised by faith. Second, this approach leads to some religions seeing themselves as gatekeepers to heaven and key players regarding hell. They say, "It's our way or the highway!" Isn't that what Jesus challenged the Temple about in his own day? The two major religions of our day, Christianity and Islam, are famous for this view. You follow Jesus or go to Follow Muhammad or go to..., well, you know....

There are some more problems with that idea of religion. It tends to reduce God, Yahweh, Allah to an enforcer of religion. A reduced God is no God! This approach gives religion the main role in terms of our eternal existence and I don't see such a *quid pro quo* operating in universe. There is no way to avoid the pain of life or death. There is no way to assure ourselves of bliss by striking a bargain or by following the rules.

And another problem I see is that our religions tend to reduce spirituality to a team sport. It's us against them – winner take all. Psalm 146 seems to feed this idea

I will praise the Lord as long as I live

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Psalm 146: 2-5,9)

Seen one way, this is a powerfully uplifting statement of faith that, as Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "the universe bends toward justice." (from speech in receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize) Unfortunately, the usually interpretation is that God favors those who are on the right team, in the right church, and ultimately punishes those who are not.

Religion is not a bad thing. It has lots of good to offer. Religion provides structure, discipline, and stories. It gives us spiritual practices that help us remember who we are, and help us remember that God is. It points our vision beyond the shadow to deep truth about existence and reminds us to have faith in the miracle that is life.

So what is the real promise of God concerning how we need to live? What is the deep truth behind our religious faith? What is the promise behind the promise? I wrote a poem about that just this week:

- Wrote a poem

Every faith, every religion, every philosophy casts a shadow

In that shadow lies an image of the Truth—

how life really is, how life really works

An image of truth is the truth, but not all of it

Truth cannot be captured, only expressed
in words and actions

In a million ordinary deeds of love, compassion, and
hope, courage, kindness, and justice

Our faith, our religion, our philosophy finds culmination

When we turn to face the light

from which all shadows are born

And we give thanks to the source of light

(Jack F Price ©2010)

Jesus pointed us to that light. Jesus showed us what that light looked like in a human life. He did not come to start a new religion, a right religion to displace Judaism. He didn't do this any

more than God (Allah) sent the prophet Muhammad to start another new and improved religion to displace Christianity. What good does having a new religion do? Religion is not the answer. Religion only points us toward the Truth. Religion can remind us of the Truth. It can provide a structure and discipline for our lives to help us remember that there is more to life than we often acknowledge. And the promise is that we can begin to see and acknowledge that “more.”

Jesus did not come to start Christianity and Christianity did not start out to be a new religion, though that transformation happened quickly. Jesus came to point us to the promise behind the promise of religion – that God is and that all life (all people) are in God loved by God! And God is in us collectively and individually.

So what? What difference does this make? The difference is that this means whenever we meet each other, we’re meeting God. When we love and respect each other, we’re loving and worshiping God. But when we condemn each other, we’re judging God. While we hold bitterness or envy toward another human being, we are pouring poison on the God who lives in us. So stop doing it right now! Find a way to let go the baggage you’re carrying around. It’s hurting you and damaging the whole body of humanity. It’s hurting the whole ecosystem of life.

So what can we do? There are three things to do. First, practice being in the present more because the present is the only place God lives. Second, get to know yourself better by getting to know others more deeply. Have one-on-one conversations with each designed to open the space for great understanding and intimacy. Third, discover your calling. Two friends of mine once said about discovering your calling that It’s not just asking, “What do I long to do?” but also, “What am I running away from? What am I resisting?” (*Invitations* by Francis Dewar, 129)

Another author said it this way, “Vocation [our calling, involves] learning to shed the unreality which simply suffocates the very life of the soul. [Calling] is what’s left when all the games have stopped.” (*Invitations* by Francis Dewar, 133) But as you’re doing these three things, don’t think they’ll make God love you. There is nothing you can do and nothing you need to do for that. God’s love is a given. So trust in laughing, loving, crying, and opening yourselves to the risk and wonder of caring enough to make a difference in the world. Let’s work to put an end to poverty, an end to racism, and an end to war. Not that we can do that by ourselves, but together we can commit ourselves to such a transformation. That’s what Jesus taught us. That’s why we should follow him today.