

“God’s Promises and Ours”
Psalm 91; Romans 8:28-39
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With the onset of the new year, it’s once again that time when we annually take stock of our lives and make those extravagant promises to change those things we don’t like about ourselves- what we call our “New Year’s resolutions.” People have been making such resolutions in every part of the world going all the way back to ancient times. The Babylonians made promises to their gods at the start of each year that they would return borrowed objects and pay their debts. The Romans began each year by making promises to the god Janus, for whom the month of January is named. In medieval times, at the end of each Christmas season, knights would take the “peacock vow” to re-affirm their commitment to chivalry. Christians throughout the ages have been no different. Many churches hold special Watchnight services each New Year’s Eve in which worshipers re-commit themselves before God, while during Rosh Hashanah—the Jewish New Year—Jews are called to reflect upon their wrongdoings throughout the past year and both seek and offer forgiveness. As we “turn the final page” on last year’s calendar, we attempt to reset our lives so that with the NEW year, we ALSO hope to “turn a brand new leaf” whether it involves becoming better persons, trying to exercise more, or just undertaking a healthier diet.

Unfortunately, the success rate for such promises has not been very “promising.” A 2007 study by Richard Wiseman from the University of Bristol involving 3,000 people showed that 88% of those who set New Year resolutions never follow through with them, despite the fact that over half of them were confident of success when they made their resolution. In a 2014 report, 35% of participants who failed their New Year’s resolutions admitted they had set unrealistic goals, 33% of participants did not keep track of their progress, and 23% forgot about them. One in ten claimed they had made TOO MANY resolutions. Knowing people’s hearts, Jesus forewarned his followers about making oaths and promises to people, that they should let their “yesses” be “yes” and their “no’s” be “no” due to our penchant for not KEEPING them!

Still, it’s impossible to refrain from making SOME commitments to people, despite the poor odds of our reliability. When we DO keep our word, it communicates that we value them, that we consider them important enough that we’ll make every effort to follow through on what we said we’d do. The bottom line is that if we can’t honor our word, then we can’t be trusted; and if we can’t be TRUSTED, then it becomes impossible to establish deep and meaningful relationships of any kind. Eventually, our lives would lack self-respect, lack real alliances and important friendships, and MOST TRAGICALLY, they’d lose the capacity to give and receive love from other persons.

The God and religion of both Judaism and Christianity are ultimately based upon such deep commitments- what we more COMMONLY refer to as “faith.” Faith is nothing more than the act of expressing “trust”- trusting God and relying on his word to us. That was something the ancient world could not do with THEIR gods. When you look at the religious pantheons of Greece and Rome, their dieties were essentially extensions of themselves. They were little more than glorified human beings who not only possessed human form but demonstrated the same kind of selfish, arrogant, vengeful and proud temperament that all humans possess. Their gods and

goddesses would leave the lofty heights of Mt. Olympus to walk among us and cause all kinds of mischief or sometimes provide good fortune. But when the situation became too difficult for them, they would tire of it all, throw off the disguise, and return once again to the security of Mt. Olympus. Their gods considered it all good clean fun. Therefore, it was difficult to “trust” such divinities as these- gods who by their own nature were just as proud and selfish, as mercurial and unreliable as we ourselves often are. And if such beings could hardly be trusted, then how much HARDER would it have been to possess or earn OUR LOVE!

In contrast to the Gentiles, the religion of the Israelites was predicated ENTIRELY upon trust. Where the prevailing religion of the pagan world was POLYTHEISTIC, that is, consisting of an entire pantheon of deities with each one equipped with his or her own individual history and personality, possessing his or her own set of desires, needs, and abilities, Judaism remained staunchly MONOTHEISTIC, that is, centered around a SINGLE God who was wholly self-sufficient and complete in himself: “Hear ye, O Israel- the Lord our God is One” (Deut. 6:4). Where the deities of the Greek and Roman world were nothing more than glorified human beings, Jehovah was spirit and entirely distinct from the rest of creation. Rather than selfish and proud, HIS character and nature were rooted in such altruistic qualities as love and justice and mercy such that everything God did reflected that same ethic. This God was consistently faithful to his own personhood, to his own promises, and to his own people with the result that everything God did could be trusted to be good, and everything promised by him could be trusted to come to fruition. As it says in the Torah, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Numbers 23:19)

Christianity was no different- it was based upon our willingness to trust in God’s “promises” to us and the eventual “fulfilment” of those promises. In our scripture lesson from Romans 8, we have the greatest, most sublime statement ever to usher from the pen of St. Paul. Where the promises and resolutions of men often come up empty, here we have God’s FINAL word to us, his ULTIMATE PLEDGE AND WORD OF ASSURANCE TO US as his children. He begins by listing a variety of adversities and adversaries which he thinks might come between us and Christ’s love. Beginning with v. 35, he mentions seven possibilities. He starts with *trouble* followed by *hardship* and then *persecution*- all three of which denote the pressures and distresses caused by an ungodly and hostile world. He then proceeds to *famine* or *nakedness*, both examples of lack whether in food or clothing. He concludes his list with *danger* or *sword*, meaning perhaps the risk of death and then the eventuality of death itself.

But then we come to verses 38 and 39, to the very CLIMAX of his argument. There is perhaps no more powerful and beloved expression of confidence and comfort in the face of all struggles and threats and suffering than the final verses of this chapter. St. Paul tells them: “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Beginning with his assertion that he is “absolutely persuaded,” which means convinced to the NTH degree, he goes on to list ten different items which some might think are powerful enough to create a barrier between us and Christ beginning with the GREATEST threat of them all- DEATH. But not even DEATH is strong enough to create such a separation. And so whether in life or in death, in height or depth, in the present or in the future- EVERYTHING is covered here and STILL there is no possible situation or scenario in all the world that can possibly separate us from the love of God through

Jesus Christ- NOTHING! We are safely and securely cradled within his inescapable embrace; his commitment to us cannot be shaken, eroded, or compromised. Thus, with these two verses, St. Paul expresses that which is the core and substance of his theology and relationship with Jesus Christ- his confidence that NOTHING will ever be able to separate him from God's love and care REGARDLESS what it might be. His confidence is not in himself and his own faith which he knows is often frail and fickle, but in GOD'S love for US. In this present world, where everything including every truth has become impermanent and relative, there is ONE thing he knows to be unalterably fixed and certain and that is Christ's love for them. This is his religion in a nutshell; this is grace, pure and undefiled. Unlike the promises of men, this is the GREATEST promise one can possibly make or receive, one that can be trusted ALWAYS because the author of it is none other than GOD HIMSELF!

This past New Year's Eve, Rose and I prepared to usher in the new year by settling down before the television in our living room and taking in a Netflix movie. It was Chadwick Boseman's final film role before his untimely death a few months ago, a portrayal which many say was his finest ever in his short career. The picture we sat back to watch was the film adaptation of August Wilson's great play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is going to garner a lot of Oscar buzz next month. Wilson, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who spent most of his life in Pittsburgh and serves as the setting for most of his plays, is possibly America's greatest dramatist over the last half of the 20th century. It's an extraordinary movie that takes place over the course of an afternoon in a recording studio during the 1920's. A group of musicians along with the legendary singer Ma Rainey--"the Mother of the Blues"--have gathered to record a series of songs. The drama occurs between her and her four musicians, each of whom brings his own perspective regarding prejudice and the grave injustices facing many in the black community. Chadwick Boseman plays Levee, a jazz-inspired trumpeter who's convinced that his musical talent is going to bring him respect and power. Ma Rainey's character, portrayed by the brilliant actress Viola Davis, is outspoken, demanding, and well aware that she will be tolerated only as long as her records make money for her white producers.

I found one scene in particular to be quite riveting. It concerned a dialogue between Levee and Cutler, another musician who plays both guitar and trombone in the band. Cutler is a deeply religious man who relates a story which had once been shared with him by a preacher he once knew. He had been traveling on a train and during a quick stop, he briefly got off to use the restroom. However, because there wasn't a colored restroom around, he was forced to use an old outhouse some two hundred yards away from the station. By the time he was done, the train has already taken off without him. Stranded in a strange town, knowing no one and with the night quickly descending, the old minister decides to walk down the tracks to the next town. Almost immediately, he's accosted by some white men who humiliate him by forcing him to dance for them. When they finally get tired of his dancing, they then grab his Bible and tear it up in front of him. Cutler explains that becoming a clown for them was the only way that preacher was ever going to get away from those men alive.

Levee, the young and easily excitable trumpet player in the group, has been listening intently to Cutler's story and suddenly grows incensed at what those white men had done to that poor preacher. He then says, "What I wants to know is . . . if he's a man of God, then where the heck was God when all of this was going on? Why wasn't God looking out for him? Why didn't God strike down them crackers with some of this lightning you talk about to me?" Cutler interjects, "Levee, you gonna burn in hell." to which Levee responds, "What I care about burning

in hell? You talk like a fool . . . burning in hell. Why didn't God strike some of them crackers down. Tell me that! That's the question! Don't come telling me this burning-in-hell nonsense! He a man of God . . . why didn't God strike some of them crackers down?" In the movie, you see this emotional scene playing out with Levee protesting over and over again, "Where was God? Why wasn't God looking after him, especially if he was a preacher? Why didn't the Lord strike those men down for accosting and humiliating a man who'd done nothing wrong to anybody?" Levee concludes that the reason God doesn't respond when we need him is not because there is no God but because he's a WHITE MAN'S God and he won't listen to the prayers of some simple black man. His complaint is that God has not only abandoned good Christians like the preacher in Cutler's story but he's forsaken the entire BLACK RACE! He protests that God hates blacks in general, hates them with all the fury in his heart and the same goes for Jesus, he doesn't love any of them EITHER.

I'm sure that Levee isn't the ONLY person to ever wonder where God is, ESPECIALLY when we witness or find OURSELVES the victim of some injustice. A marriage dissolves, a child dies, one's dreams are suddenly quashed- there are any number of reasons when one, in moments of intense fear or pain or loneliness might look to God for some peace and comfort but none is forthcoming; God seems to be missing in action when we need him most. It's a question that isn't just limited to the Levees of the world but one that EVERY Christian has had to ask him or herself, and often MORE than once. After all, doesn't God's word clearly state that if we call upon him, he'll be right there to deliver us in times of trouble and keep us safe. Psalm 91 immediately comes to mind where we are told how God is our refuge and our shelter in whom we can trust; how God pledges to be there for us, to watch over us and protect us whether it is the threat of war or the scourge of sickness and disease. And then to let us know that we CAN trust him and his promise, God speaks to us from out of his OWN MOUTH: "Because he cleaves to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him trouble, I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him my salvation." Well if God loves us so much, that why didn't he deliver that poor preacher from the threat of those white men? If we can't take him at his word and believe him when he says he's going to be there for us when we need him most, then how much confidence can any of us have in all those OTHER promises God makes to us- you know, his promise about life after death, his promise about returning at the end of history and establishing his kingdom once and for all where there will be no more tears or suffering or death? There are times when it seems like God is no better at keeping his promises than the ones WE tend to make each and every New Year's Eve!

Certainly, if ANY man could have raised such a complaint, it would have been the APOSTLE PAUL for few persons in this world ever experienced greater suffering and persecution for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ than him. Yet, in time, he came to understand that a willingness to surrender one's life for a GREATER cause was the truest and ultimate test of a person's faith. NOWHERE does he imply that as Christians, we are going to be spared tears and heartache, hardship or even death. Too many Christians are given the false assurance by well-meaning preachers that once they come to Christ and make him an integral part of their lives, that life from then on will all be "sweetness and light," that the future will finally become comfortable and easy.

This was because for the Apostle Paul, one's relationship with Christ was not the END of one's struggles but rather, only the BEGINNING. He wrote in his epistles how for the sake of

the gospel, he spent almost as much time in prison as out of it, that he was flogged with forty lashes five times, beaten with rods three times, stoned and shipwrecked three times. His life was constantly in danger whether from the elements or from robbers, his fellow Jews or Gentiles, whether in the city or in the countryside. He had known hunger and thirst, been naked and cold, and STILL he would happily endure it all over again for the sake of knowing Christ as his lord. He understood all too well that God does not extend to us a special dispensation which insulates us from experiencing trials and tribulations, pain and heartache in our lifetimes. In fact, far from promising us a life of ease and blessing and prosperity, the New Testament says just the OPPOSITE- that BECAUSE of our commitment to Christ, we are MORE than likely to experience ADDITIONAL trials in our lives. To be a Christian in the first century was both difficult and dangerous, and if the prophets and Early Church were subject to some of the worst persecution imaginable, then what makes us think some two millennia on that WE should be exempt from such hardship OURSELVES.

Our mistake lies in wanting to believe that God is some kind of genie who can be conjured up to do our bidding whenever we need him, that all we have to do is call out to him and he will instantly respond by removing our problems and making everything all right again. The fallacy here is believing that Christianity is supposed to be some kind of analgesic or insurance policy which will insulate us from all the problems and difficulties our world may throw at us when the REALITY is that suffering, sickness, tragedy, and death are as integral to life as breathing is and NO ONE can be immune from their effects, ESPECIALLY Christians. As Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and devout Christian recently wrote in a recent article for *The New York Times* on the mystery of human and divine suffering, "...there is no good answer to the question, 'Why is there suffering?' Jesus never answers that question, and even if we had the theological answer, it would not ease our burdens in any significant way. *What God offers instead is the promise that he is with us in our suffering; that he can bring good out of it (life out of death, forgiveness out of sin); and that one day he will put a stop to it and redeem it.* God, Revelation tells us, will make 'all things new.' For now, though, we are part of a drama unfolding in a broken world, one in which God chose to become a protagonist."

Friends, Wehner is right- the only promise we have is that Jesus will be with us in the midst of our suffering- that is the ONLY promise the Bible gives us and every other promise is merely an extension or extrapolation of that same promise. We are assured that whatever we experience in life--from the comic to the tragic, amid all its ups and all its downs--we will never experience it alone, that Christ walks right beside us WHEREVER we go and will never leave our side. He inhabits us SPIRITUALLY through the presence of his Holy Spirit which makes our heart his new home; and he accompanies us PHYSICALLY through the love and support we receive through his EARTHLY Body- the Church. Hence, our Lord personally manifests himself to us through these means and they become for us our assurance that we are NEVER alone, NEVER forsaken, and NEVER forced to face any of life's problems and adversities by ourselves. Sometimes, it might not seem FAIR and at other times, it might not seem ENOUGH- God's promise to stand WITH us AT OUR SIDE, imparting to us his faith and strength and love in the hour we need him most. Levee's words come to mind over the abuse and humiliation suffered by that black preacher at the hands of those white men: "Why didn't God strike down them crackers with some of this lightning you talk about to me?" Yet, as we draw closer to Christ, the conviction grows with greater understanding and greater intensity that the promise of

his abiding presence is MORE than sufficient to help us through every situation. After all, did he not say to his followers, “If God be for you, who then can be AGAINST YOU!”

Therefore, we never have to give in to fear or despair but instead can confront each new challenge of each new day with an unearthly confidence and a heavenly peace. We are assured that despite what we may have done in the past or may be experiencing in the present or may yet encounter in the future, we STILL claim the love and support of him who abides with us yesterday, today, and tomorrow; of him who will always be there for us regardless how high the waves or how strong the winds; of him who promises to carry us even when we’re much too weak to walk OURSELVES- even in DEATH he will be there for us. So be of good cheer. When all looks bleak and dark, hang in there! Never give up and never surrender hope for with God on our side, we will always be MORE than conquerors! Amid all the resolutions broken and empty guarantees given in this world, this remains the one enduring promise we CAN trust. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, may you burn this truth upon our heart and lives; may we never doubt the fact that you do INDEED love us with an everlasting love and that nothing will ever separate us from your presence- not death nor life nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation. May we find that promise sufficient for us and powerful enough to lift us up above every trial, every problem we may ever face. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.