

Sermon - December 24, 2017 - Advent 4

According to His Word

Luke 1:26–38



Dear Friends in Christ

Grace and peace from our Lord and Saviour
Jesus Christ!

Most of us are familiar with these statements, first: “Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” Also, “Do you promise to love, honour, and cherish, for better or for worse, till death parts you?” or this other one: “Do you promise to be my best friend... pinky swear?”

As you know, we do live in a world of promises made; now, the interesting part is that some are kept, unfortunately many are broken.

And this is most certainly true, where there are large amounts of money or property involved, the promises are minutely defined in long and complicated legal documents to make sure there’s no wiggle room and no loophole by which one can escape the obligations of his or her promises. Long gone are the days in which we depended on somebody’s word.

Even in the closest of relationships, promises are broken and people are let down, disappointed, and left feeling betrayed. A father tells his children “I know I promised to be at your soccer game, but something’s come up.” A man tells his wife, “There’s someone else.” One nation tells another, “We will not honour our treaties.”

So here we are this morning, and maybe you’ve been the victim of a broken promise. Or perhaps you’re the one who’s broken promises, I know have many times over.

Our sermon text for this morning is the Gospel reading we heard a few minutes ago, where the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and bear a son. This great announcement to Mary and, ultimately, to us some two thousand years later is part of the ongoing fulfillment of God’s promises. In this text, we have the assurance that we can trust God, for God acts according to His Word.

I. God fully intended to act according to his Word of promise despite our unfaithfulness.

God gives us the promises of his Word at our worst moments. At the fall into sin, when Adam and Eve deserved nothing but condemnation and death because of their disobedience toward God, the Lord gave the first promise of the Saviour. While God pronounced judgment upon sin, he also offered words of hope as he promised to provide a Saviour from sin. He established a covenant relationship with the children of Israel—in other words, a relationship built on promises that God had made and that God fully and divinely fulfilled those promises.

We even see God fulfilling his promised to the people of Israel, even though they often were rebellious; instead “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6). Lest Israel begin to think there was something about them or something they’d done that deserved or merited God’s great and precious promises, the Lord reminded them: “For

you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery” (Deut 7:6–8).

Our Old Testament Reading for this morning is an account of God’s continuing promises. In this lesson, King David resolved to build a house—a temple for God in Jerusalem. But God promised David that he would make David a house. In other words, that he would establish the line of David. God told David, “your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16). And from that house, from that line one day would come the promised Saviour. A promise that was reconfirmed by the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Is 7:14).

II. The annunciation to the Virgin Mary is God acting according to his Word to redeem fallen mankind.

So what does all this have to do with our sermon text? Simply this, we see God’s promises given in the Old Testament, being fulfilled. It becomes evident that the annunciation to the Virgin Mary is an account of God at work, according to his Word, keeping his promises to redeem fallen mankind.

The Text tells us that the angel appeared in the “the sixth month.” But, the sixth month of what? The verses preceding our sermon text tell of the promise to Elizabeth and Zechariah—a childless couple who were well past the age of childbearing. The promise was that they would have a son, one who would “make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (1:17). This promise was delivered by no less than Gabriel, an angel or messenger of God. Indeed, Elizabeth did become pregnant, and it was in the sixth month of her pregnancy that this same angel/messenger from God came to Mary.

Most commentators say that Mary was probably about fourteen or fifteen years old, a virgin, who was already engaged to Joseph, who was “of the house of David.” With these words, one begins to sense that God is at work according to his Word.

The angel Gabriel, sent from God, announced to Mary that she would “conceive . . . and bear a son, and . . . call his name Jesus” (v 31). Furthermore, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (vv 32–33). These are incredible words of promise! As Mary considered these words, she asked how they could be fulfilled, because she was a virgin. She was only engaged to Joseph, and that did not allow for any marital relations whereby a child might be conceived. But the angel Gabriel assured her that she would miraculously conceive and that the child to be born would be called holy—the Son of God. The angel assured Mary that, according to God’s Word of promise, her aged cousin Elizabeth was already six months along in her pregnancy. As with Elizabeth, so also with Mary—with God, nothing is impossible. God’s Word is good. God would do what he’d said he’d do, and he would do it because he gave his Word. So Mary responds in faith, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (v 38).

This evening, at our Christmas Eve service, and tomorrow at our Christmas Day service, we will hear the familiar account of the birth of Jesus. For a moment, let's lay aside all tradition and sentimentality about this event. Let's focus on the Word of God spoken by his messenger Gabriel to Mary. In the next twenty-four hours, we will hear in this wondrous account of the Saviour's birth that God kept his promise to Mary. According to his Word, even though she was a virgin, she did conceive; she did bear a Son.

This miraculous event invites us to examine further God's Word that follows. So we look to the four Gospels of the New Testament. They are the account of God keeping his Word in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This Word is not only the Word he gave to Mary, but also the Word he gave to you. Recall that familiar Bible verse: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

III. Therefore, God does act for us according to his Word, whatever we or others have done with our word.

Perhaps you've recently been the victim of someone who didn't keep his word, and as a result you perhaps experienced loss and pain. You don't know where to go or to whom you can turn. But listen Jesus's words: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:28–29). In Jesus Christ, God has given his Word, and he acts according to his Word.

Maybe you're the one who hasn't kept your word. Maybe you've broken promises, you've betrayed trusts, and you've hurt others, including those close to you. What do you do with the guilt and shame of what you've done to others by not keeping your word? There's nothing any of us can think, say, or do to atone for past wrongs, but God invites us to come to him for forgiveness. In his Son's suffering and death at the cross, he has paid the price for all sin and gives us this word: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). In Jesus Christ, God has given his Word, and he acts according to his Word.

Perhaps you're one who simply struggles with God's Word and promise. Living in a world and an age that seems dominated by skepticism and cynicism, we're easily tempted to wonder about and question God's Word. Is there something tangible that will strengthen and sustain our faith? Is there something that will provide us with the forgiveness we need and the assurance of God's promised grace and mercy? In response, God invites us to "Take and eat. This is my body given for you. Take and drink. This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." In Jesus Christ, God has given his Word, and he acts according to his Word.

"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (v 38). God gave Mary the faith to take him at his Word. She was invited to hear his Word through the angel Gabriel and to trust and believe that the seemingly impossible would happen simply because God said it would. Now that's faith! In Jesus Christ, God has given his Word, and he acts according to his Word. Today, you are also invited to hear and believe, as did Mary. God also grants to you and me the faith to respond to all his promises with the response, "Let it be to me according to your word."

This morning, as we consider these promises to Mary, as we gather this evening to hear the wondrous account of the fulfillment of God's promises to Mary in the birth of

Jesus, and as we read of all that Jesus has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection, may God grant us all the response of faith, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:20–21).