

Command and Promise

Sunday March 5, 2023

by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! I greet you after having been away for three Sundays in February due to school and a short break in the academic terms. I am so happy to be back with you. I prayed for you every day that we were apart, and hope you have been praying for me too. I know there has been a lot happening in my absence. I invite you to set up a time with me in the weeks to come if you need some pastoral care or support. You can do that by email or by talking to me after the service.

I don't know about any of you, but sometimes in my own life I feel stuck. Like I can't move. Like all the past has faded away or that the future might never come. Stalled out. Jammed up. In Limbo. Stymied. I might be feeling like this because I am just about to finish seminary and I don't know what comes next. Please pray a call is awaiting for me close by afterward.

When I feel stuck, I tend to forget about the good things that have happened in my past. I forget about the love and support I have in the present. And the future, well, let's not even talk about that. When I am stuck. When I am lost. When I am not sure what comes next I get irritable, restless, discontent.

Several years ago, I was reading a book on spirituality. The author was writing about a person in a small group trying to find out if God was calling them to be a pastor. When I read that sentence, I felt like someone dumped a bucket of ice water over my head. I slammed that book and I said, "Not on your life!" Well, I said something like "not on your life" but I probably shouldn't repeat it from the pulpit.

One way of looking at this situation is I had read a sentence in a book and nothing had happened. Well, I had gotten emotional reading a sentence in a book and stopped reading. That is one way of looking.

Another way is that the Spirit was speaking to me. God's Spirit used the means it had at its disposal to communicate with me. I was an English major and like to read, so there was a good chance I had a book in my hand. The Holy Spirit asked me a question about my own life through another person's writing, and I said, "NO WAY!" In the same tone when my parents would ask my sister to clean her room when she was a child and she would shout back, "YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!"

In today's reading from Genesis, Abraham was going about his daily life and he heard a voice. When we read the bible it is easy for us to forget that the people we are reading about were people much like us. Abraham was someone just like us. Except, one day he heard an unknown voice from an unknown God that said, "*Get up. Take your family and your extended family out of this city you love. Leave your friends, your neighbors, and your community and head out into the desert. No, you don't get to know where you are going. No, you don't know who I am. No one knows who I am, not your friends, your neighbors, your community. None of your priests and pastors have ever heard of me Abraham. But trust me huh?*"

Abraham lived in a big cosmopolitan city filled with many different religions. His extended family lived in that city with him. He was comfortable. He liked his neighbors. He didn't have any big plans for himself. But then he heard this voice. A voice of something claiming to be a god who made vague promises and then asked Abraham to do some really drastic things.

This sounds, I don't know, a little like a horror movie. This sounds like how cults are started. How would you react if we saw our neighbor out on their lawn one day and they said to us, "You know what? I heard this voice I have never heard before and it told me to sell my house and take my family in the car and to just keep driving!" When I got home I might be calling the police to do a welfare check on my neighbor. But this is exactly what happened to Abraham! Can you imagine being Abraham's wife?

Genesis 12:1 tells us, "The LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. " Then God promises 1) offspring 2) land 3) a personal blessing 4) and then a blessing to all people through Abraham's family.

What a set of promises! But they also came with a set of demands. As Lutherans we have traditionally called these commands. This is where we get our language for the 10 Commandments. Luther assured us that every time God gives us commands, there are also promises attached.

But, every time the Loving One makes us a promise, there are some commands for us as well. This is what a covenant is in the Old and New Testament. It is a contract, an agreement. It is a relationship. This is why we say every Sunday at communion "Again after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant (or as Pastor Jana says, a Promise) in my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin..." Jesus commands us to "do this in his memory" and in exchange our sins are forgiven.

This is big radical stuff. What we do each Sunday at the Lord's Supper is just as big and as radical as God giving Abraham a huge blessing and then telling Abraham to pack up his bags and his family and to head out into the desert. It is a personal relationship with God, who speaks to us and acts in our lives. Each week. Think about that! We get used to it. It becomes a habit. We take it for granted. But God is still there, still real. Still forgiving us and guiding us out into the world. That is the other part of God's command to us at the Lord's Supper, after we are fed and blessed, we are commanded to go out in the world, just like Abraham.

Sometimes when we hear God's voice we would rather not. Sometimes when we hear God's call, we turn our attention to our smartphones, or the television, or back to whatever it was we were doing. Or sometimes, we react like my sister and tell God, "You can't make me!"

Sometimes we are unable to hear what God is saying to us because we are so distracted by what is going on around us. Things are moving too quickly. We are moving too quickly to give any thought to God, let alone what God might be saying to us.

As frequently happens in my own house, my husband will be talking to me and I will be reading a book and when it sounds appropriate I might say, “Uh-huh,” or “okay.” Only later do I realize that I have no idea what he has said! I have to go back and say, “I am sorry, I missed everything you just said, can you repeat that please?” It is embarrassing. It is humbling. It might even hurt the other person’s feelings. But I also want to know what I just agreed to!

So often in our lives we are distracted, busy, on autopilot, or too stressed to pay attention to what God is saying to us. We buzz like a bee from one flower to the next or like a fly from one garbage can to the next without much thought. Without much reflection. We are sure that there is a tastier something just ahead if we keep buzzing around.

If we get ourselves into trouble, or go hungry, or come up against a wall, we say like the psalmist, “I lift up my eyes | to the hills; from where is my | help to come?” But in our busyness and distraction we have forgotten all about God. We don’t remember, “Our help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.” We forget, “The LORD will not let our feet be moved nor will the one who watches over us fall asleep.” And because we don’t remember, it is hard for us to have faith. It is hard for us to have faith in God’s promises because we have spent so little time listening for what God originally had to say. We’ve forgotten there are also commands for us in order for the promises to come true.

When we forget about God, we think all of our accomplishments are our own. When we forget about God, we have nowhere to turn in our troubles. We begin to think we are alone and that everything is up to us. Eventually, with this mindset, we believe it is us against the world, that we need to look out for ourselves because no one else will. We say, “We got ours, let everyone else get theirs.” There is no God in this. There is no room for God in this outlook. But this place is where most of us usually end up at some point in our lives. Maybe some of you are here right now.

This is what Paul reminds us about today in Romans. Abraham’s blessings didn’t come through Abraham’s hard work or his own merit. Our blessings don’t come to us through our own work or our own merit. All of our blessings come from God. It is God who blesses us, not ourselves. We can cooperate with the Holy One to receive those blessings, but we don’t earn them or grab them on our own.

Here at Christ Lutheran Church, we are listening today for that promise and that blessing from God. It is God’s blessing and God’s promises that we are hoping for in our own lives and communities this Sunday. It is in God’s power, God’s love, and God’s transforming grace that we put our trust rather than in our own human efforts.

Jesus tells Nicodemus in the gospel of John today, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

So let us still ourselves long enough to hear what God might be calling us to today. Let us listen to that still small voice and trust in it. Let us pray for the help and guidance of God to do what we are called to. It is here, when we place our trust in God, that we also begin to believe in God’s promises. It is here, we begin to see God’s Kin-dom come to earth.

This is the Good News I have heard this week and bring to you this morning.