

The Passion of the Psalms: Promises

July 27, 2008

Year A: Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

One day, after a near eternity in the Garden of Eden, Adam calls out, "Lord, I have a problem."

"What's the problem, Adam?", the Lord replies.

"Lord, I know you created me and have provided for me and surrounded me with this beautiful garden and all of these wonderful animals, but I'm just not happy."

"Why is that, Adam?", comes the reply from the heavens.

"Lord, I am lonely."

"Well, Adam, in that case I have the perfect solution. I shall create a 'woman' for you."

"What's a 'woman,' Lord?"

"This 'woman' will be the most intelligent, sensitive, caring, and beautiful creature I have ever created. She will be so intelligent that she can figure out what you want before you want it. She will be so sensitive and caring that she will know your every mood and how to make you happy. Her beauty will rival that of the heavens and earth. She will unquestioningly care for your every need and desire. She will be the perfect companion for you," replies the heavenly voice.

"Sounds good to me!" exclaims Adam.

"She will be, but this is going to cost you, Adam."

"How much will this 'woman' cost me Lord?", Adam replies.

"She'll cost you a leg, an arm, a lung, an eye, and an ear."

Adam ponders this for some time, with a look of deep thought and concern on his face. Finally, Adam asks the Lord, "Uh, what can I get for a rib?"¹

Today I want to talk about Promises, one of the passionate pleas that we find in our Psalms.

Read Passage (Norwesca) / Hymn #828 (Sanctuary)

[Psalm 105:1-11 \(NRSV\)](#)

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. ²Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. ³Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. ⁴Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually. ⁵Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, ⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

¹ "What can I get for a rib?" *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part I.* 29.

⁷He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth. ⁸He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, ⁹the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, ¹⁰which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, ¹¹saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance."

These past couple of weeks I have thought a lot about the concept of a Promise. Promise – that I trust the internet that it will properly reserve my airline ticket to Dallas. Promise – that the pilots of the plane know what they were doing. Promise – that the plane will pass inspection. Then when I got to Dallas I really had to trust in the promise of others. That our shuttle ride to the hotel would be there. That our shuttle bus to the church for the Memorial Service would be where it said it would be and take us to the right place. Then when the service was over we had to trust in the promise that here in this city I've only been to once I would be returned back to our hotel. You know going to another city, attending a Conference I have never been to before, trusting in the hospitality of others all meant that Sarah and I really had to trust in their promise to take care of us.

We often think of a promise as that experience that happened to Sarah and myself while attending Jurisdictional Conference. We had to put our trust and faith in the promise of so many other people. It was for us the ultimate test of trust. But in this Psalm we do not have the example of just a mere promise something that Sarah and I experience. This is not the "I promise to pick you up" kind. This is not the "I promise not to loose your luggage kind." This is not "I promise not to get lost trying to find the church kind." This is a promise of incredible proportions. This is a promise of New Life. A promise of a New Start. A promise of a New Beginning. Verse 11 says it all for the rest of the Psalm: "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance."

You see what is missing here in the hymnal is the rest of the Psalm. It is the story of the enslavement, then the release from Egypt, then the long journey to a foreign land. What we have in this Psalm is the story of God's people who trust in God's Promise. The promise is not some mere "I promise to take you to the right place;" no this is a promise that God will make all things new just for you.

Since we are talking about stories let me tell you about Lydia Patterson Institute. Currently it is the only United Methodist high school that serves a predominately Latino population. This Institute owned by our South Central Jurisdiction was started by Lydia Patterson, a devout Methodist and longtime member of the Trinity Church in El Paso. For a number of years she assisted Mr. and Mrs. J. F. Corbin at the Effie Edington School for Mexican Girls, which met in the basement of El Mesías Church in downtown El Paso. Recognizing the need for a more comprehensive education program for Spanish-speaking students, Mrs. Patterson and the Corbins envisioned a high school and center for the training of young men as Methodist pastors. After Mrs. Patterson's death her husband, Millard, donated \$75,000 for the construction of a school. The institute opened in 1913 and by the 1920s the school established a theological

department and in 1930 the Institute was designated the official training center for pastors serving Spanish-speaking Methodists. That is the story of Lydia Patterson and its history but when I was in Dallas I learned of the promise.

Lydia Patterson is truly a success story for Spanish speaking people in northern Mexico and Texas. And for The United Methodist Church and our South Central Jurisdiction we have been able to lift up this promise of a New Start, a New Beginning, of hope. Some of you may remember Bishop Joel and his wife Raquel Martinez. Both are graduates of the institute and promote the school wherever they can. While I was in Dallas we had a presentation from the school and learned of their incredible success rate. 95% of all high school students go on to college. Now you may think that the percentage is good and ranks with most high schools in Nebraska. But look where these students come from. Most of them live just a few blocks from the school but every day must cross a bridge into El Paso from their home in Juarez, Mexico. Most of these students live in abject poverty and are only able to attend school through our mission dollars. They are given a Promise of New Life, of a New Start, of a New Beginning. They are living on the story of Psalm 105, just listen to verse 12: "When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in it, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, 'Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.'" This Psalm was spoken to a people that needed to be reminded of the Promise from God who protected them into a new place. And this Psalm still speaks to people today that need to hear that poverty can be overcome, that you can overcome a language barrier, that a border fence will not stop the drive of human beings to be the people of God. This is a Psalm that gives the hope of New Life, the hope a New Start, the hope a New Beginning. And this is not some mere promise. This is the promise of graduates who have served as our Bishop, of graduates that today fill our United Methodist pulpits including at least two in Nebraska. These are graduates that go onto United Methodist Colleges and become doctors, lawyers, professors, these are professional people – these are God's people – that have been provided for through the promise of the church.

This is the promise of Psalm 105. When you need a promise that life will be better, when you need the promise that only comes from a New Start, when you need a promise of a church that says we will make it happen, that God is listening. We need the promise of Psalm 105.

It was one of the hottest days of the dry season. Rain had not been seen in almost a month. The crops were dying. Cows had stopped giving milk. The creeks and streams were long gone back into the earth. It was a dry season that would bankrupt seven farmers before it was through.

Every day, the Wilson family would go about the arduous process of trying to get water to the fields. Lately this process had involved taking a truck to the local water rendering plant and filling it up with water. But severe rationing had cut everyone off.

If they didn't see some rain soon. . . they would lose everything. It was on this day that the Wilson's learned the true lesson of sharing and witnessed the only miracle ever seen with one's own eyes.

Betty Wilson was in the kitchen making lunch for her husband and his brothers when she saw her six-year old son, Billy, walking toward the woods. He wasn't walking with the usual carefree abandon of a youth but with a serious purpose. She could only see his back. He was obviously walking with a great effort . . . trying to be as still as possible. Minutes after he disappeared into the wood, he came running out again, toward the house. Mrs. Wilson went back to making sandwiches; thinking that whatever task he had been doing was completed.

Moments later, however, he was once again walking in that slow purposeful stride toward the woods. This activity went on for an hour: walk carefully to the woods, run back to the house. Finally, mom couldn't take it any longer and crept out of the house and followed him on his journey (being very careful not to be seen).

He was cupping both hands in front of him as he walked; being very careful not to spill the water he held in them . . . maybe two or three tablespoons were held in his tiny hands. She sneaked close as he went into the woods. Branches and thorns slapped his little face but he did not try to avoid them. He had a much higher purpose. As she leaned in to spy on him, she saw the most amazing site.

Several large deer loomed in front of him. Billy walked right up to them. She almost screamed for him to get away. A huge buck with elaborate antlers was dangerously close. But the buck did not threaten him. . . he didn't even move as Billy knelt down. And she saw a tiny fawn laying on the ground, obviously suffering from dehydration and heat exhaustion, lift his head with great effort to lap up the water cupped in her beautiful boy's hand.

When the water was gone, Billy jumped up to run back to the house and mom hid behind a tree. She followed him back to the house; to a spigot that they had shut off the water to. Billy opened it all the way up and a small trickle began to creep out. He knelt there, letting the drip drip slowly fill up his makeshift "cup," as the sun beat down on his little back. And it came clear to Betty Wilson.

The trouble he had gotten into for playing with the hose the week before. The lecture he had received about the importance of not wasting water. The reason he didn't ask for help. It took almost twenty minutes for the drops to fill his hands. When he stood up and began the trek back, his mom was there in front of him. His little eyes just filled with tears. "I'm not wasting," was all he said. As he began his walk, his mom joined him. . . with a small pot of water from the kitchen. She let him tend to the fawn. Mom stayed away. It was his job.

Betty Wilson stood on the edge of the woods watching the most beautiful heart she had ever known working so hard to save another life. As the tears that rolled down her face began to hit the ground, they were suddenly joined by other drops. . . and more drops. . . and more. For when she looked up at the sky. It was as if God, was weeping with pride.²

² "Boy gives water to deer." *Ibid.*, Part III. 37.

The promise of Psalm 105 is the story of the promise of God. Just listen to these final words in the Psalm: “For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant. So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples, that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Praise the Lord!”

This is our story. This is the story of the Promise of God. For when I was in Dallas I learned that we are part of this promise. We heard a lot of reports and one of them was for VIM – Volunteers in Mission. That day they focused on Louisiana. Remember how we stood outside this church and gathered up pillows, clothes, diapers, food for our brothers and sisters. Well, folks, we were just one of many many churches that came together to lift up these members in our Jurisdiction. We heard stories of people who tried to save other human beings from the rushing of the water and were devastated when they couldn’t get everyone. We heard and saw pictures of churches devastated, of church populations simply uprooted. And then we heard Bishop Hutchinson of Louisiana give a sermon on a promise: He told the people of Louisiana – we will rebuild. He told them - we will be the church again. He told them - we will be the people that God wants us to be here in Louisiana. And then everyone in that audience stood and looked right at our brothers and sisters from Louisiana and gave them a standing ovation and I get tears still just thinking about it.

The story of the promise of God is that the promise of new life, of a new start, and of a new beginning will happen. And we are part of that story. Every time we lift up our brothers and sisters no matter where they are in the globe we are living out the promise of Psalm 105. Every time we provide a scholarship for a graduate of Lydia Patterson we are living out the promise of New Life. Every time we send a mission group to a church in Louisiana we live out the story of the promise found in God’s people. Every time we do this we fulfill God’s promise. Amen.