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Bethel - All Saints 2018

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

God Promises

I promise. Some words carry more weight than others. *I promise*. These are words that are particularly powerful.

When I was younger, I used to throw those words around a little bit more. I didn't take them too seriously. 8 year old me would promise to clean my room and get distracted by Barbies. 16 year old me would promise to call my mom when I arrived safely at my destination and then get distracted by Barbies... (okay I mean cute boys.) 24 year old me might promise to return a favor and get too busy to actually do it.

Getting married certainly deepened my understanding of these words, as I not only promised Travis that I would be faithful, but covenanted with God to love, honor and cherish this one person for all of our days.

But *nothing* has made me more aware of how and when I use the words, “I promise” than having children. When I make a promise to my kids, they take me seriously.

For example, if we are at the park and I promise a certain snack when we return home, I better deliver on that snack! Carrots may not be subbed in for cucumbers. Pretzels aren’t okay when I’ve promised goldfish! I learned that the hard way when I discovered we were out of green popsicles one afternoon - those are James’s favorite and an orange popsicle would NOT do!

When I promise to read Marlow a certain book, or be home in time to snuggle Ray before bed, or let James watch an extra episode of Max & Ruby because he shared a toy with the twins - I had better keep my promise. Those may seem like small promises, but I have quickly learned to carefully choose my words when I make a promise to my children. Because it is a big deal to break a promise. My kids are teaching me to take promises seriously - to count on them.

“I promise” is powerful because it’s not *just* words. These two simple words create a hoped for reality. A vision of the future that is filled with emotion, joy, delight. A promise sets action into motion, creates a road map for a series of events to take place.

“I promise” becomes a hope-filled reality: the words “I promise” set hope and expectation in motion.

Jesus speaks to us in promises in our Gospel reading from Matthew. Today is an important day to speak of promises as we remember those Saints who have passed on to their eternal dwelling place in this past year. And these big promises of God are important to hear because it’s not only the deaths of those in the last year that we are remembering.

Maybe you, like me, are thinking about those saints that have gone in the last few years, or even losses from many years ago that are still felt deeply on a day like today. My father died 3 years ago this month, and not a day goes by when I don’t want to call him. And hug him. And share a story about the grandchildren he prayed so faithfully to have. My Grandmother died last summer and how I wish she could have seen me preach in Bethel’s historic pulpit. She felt a strong call to ministry in a time when women were not ordained, and she was my greatest fan.

Powerful are the promises of God made in the Beatitudes, because it is not only death that creates loss and grief. Maybe the loss you have experienced in the last year comes from leaving - departing from a job, or from a home, from friends or family. Loss

happens when you or someone you love is struggling with illness. Loss is felt when you become a caretaker to someone you love, and you recognize all you have given up in order to offer that care. Loss comes from disappointment, from hopes dashed. Loss is the result of “what if’s?”, the road not taken, the choices that shape our lives.

We experience a lot of pain and suffering in this life, and today is a day to name our struggles, to name our grief, because the words of promise we hear from Matthew today are not confined to only the loss we experience in death.

Our opening scripture from Revelation is an example. It was a letter written as a word of encouragement, hope, and comfort to Christians who were struggling with many losses- loss of their identity, their independence, and the threat of the loss of their life. This promise that is spoken is for those many years ago, but also to each of us as we go through ordeals great and small. For all those who are struggling to find hope and healing, Christ’s promise is to “*wipe away every tear*”. My friends, this is a promise not just for long ago, but a promise to us today.

Notice in our reading from Matthew, Jesus blesses all kinds of people, especially people who aren’t normally blessed: the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, and so on. Jesus doesn’t say, one day you will be blessed, but says *blessed ARE*. Even now, even in the midst of silent losses and grief you ARE blessed.

I wrestle with this. We think of Blessings as beautiful little gifts of happiness and joy. But, blessings aren’t an immunization from pain and loss- they do not a guarantee of safe passage through life. Instead, “blessing” is a gift from God right where we are in the messiness of life.

It’s difficult to hear these words of promise sometimes, because so many times, our experiences of promises have been filled with disappointment. And it’s hard to trust such a promise and admit our need for those promises in the deep struggles we experience. Too many times I have heard someone say that when they struggle or doubt they are letting God down- they aren’t being faithful. But that’s just not true!!

The Bible is filled with so many stories of faithful people who struggled. The stories of our Bethel saints are filled with struggle. We all face difficulties in this life. So much so that Martin Luther, in the midst of his reforming the church added to the “marks of the church”. Along with preaching, worship, confession, baptism and communion, he added suffering. Luther knew that where there is faith, there is also struggle.

When we struggle, doubt, feel overwhelmed, and wonder if God is out there — it's not a sign of lack of faith, but instead an example of profound faith as we wrestle with these questions and take God and God's promises seriously.

My friends hear the Good News: God promises. God sees what weighs down our hearts, the depression or addition that oppresses, the challenges we face, the uphill battles we climb. God sees them. God blesses them. God speaks promise to them.

In the face of whatever loss weighs down your heart today, God's promises are different than the promises we casually make to our toddlers at the park. God's promises are to be taken seriously, as they become a hope filled reality.

Jesus will indeed wipe every tear from our eyes one day, and in the meantime, he sees our struggles and knows our grief. Children of God, you ARE blessed, no matter what mess and struggle of life you are in the midst of. God promises. Amen.

LET US PRAY: God of all times and places, you have brought us to the beginning of a new day. Surround us with your all-embracing love, and grant that this day we turn not aside into sin, nor be overcome by adversity, but let our thoughts, words, and actions, in some small way, make for the coming of your Kingdom on earth. Praise be always to you, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer God, who continually inspires and guides workers and witnesses. Open our hearts and spirits, that we may be your saints of the future. In this and all things we pray in your holy name. Amen.