

Psalm 23
Matthew 28:16-20

22nd Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 21, 2018

Promises, Promises

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today expresses confidence in the Lord's care. Two images are employed: the Shepherd who cares for his sheep and the Host who cares for his guest. Listen to these familiar, reassuring words of the 23rd Psalm...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson presents a scene that occurs after the resurrection of Christ. Eleven disciples have gone to a meeting place, as Jesus had directed them. There the Lord gives instruction in what we know as the Great Commission. And then he makes a promise. Listen to these words from Matthew 28:16-20...

Sermon

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for you are with me.”

“And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.”

Across the centuries, these promises have brought comfort and assurance to millions of believers. Come what may, God is with us. They are words which speak to our need to be reassured in the midst of the daily pressures of life.

And all of us need such reassurance. The various crises of youth, middle-age, and old age can leave us a bit shell-shocked, and however graciously our passage through time, we welcome the re-assurance of Christ's promised presence with us.

A group of people were having coffee and talking casually. A psychiatrist was there, and one of the ladies asked him in a whispered voice, “Dr. Chalmers have you read that new book on aggression?” “What?” he asked. “That new book,” she whispered again, “on human aggression.” She simply could not ask the question assertively or loudly enough to be heard! She needed to be reassured before she could feel a real part of the group.

According to statistics, one in six adults in the U.S. have reading skills below the fourth-grade level. Many cannot read the poison warnings on a can of pesticide, a letter from their children’s teacher, the front page of a newspaper, or today’s bulletin. Anybody faced with that kind of challenge needs to be assured of God’s presence. And one way that presence can be known is to have help from people who *can* read in the form of tutors. A lady in Bangor, Maine, who benefited from a group called Literacy Volunteers, expressed delight at the change she experienced:

“I just needed somebody that could listen and want to help me. It’s like opening up a Christmas present every day. It’s just awesome!”

Most of us know what it is to walk through a dark valley. Even the valley of the shadow of death. A valley filled with dark shadows. Well, in that passage, we need the reassurance that God is with us and will lead us through the valley. And that *nothing* can separate us from his love that we know in Jesus Christ. Such faith in God’s care in the midst of sorrow can enable us in turn to help those in the valley to know God’s love, strength, presence, and comfort.

Most of us know a hymn that echoes the thoughts of this message. We’ll sing it at the close of our worship service:

Standing on the promises of Christ, my King!
Thro’ eternal ages let His praises ring;
“Glory in the highest!” I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.

And then quickly and confidently into the refrain:

Standing, standing,
 Standing on the promises of God, my Savior;
 Standing, standing,
 I'm standing on the promises of God.

And you know what? Sunday after Sunday, year after year, some of us simply stood there! The fault, of course, was not in the Gospel Hymn; the fault was within us as we stood on the promises and did little else.

For the Promises of Christ our King—the One to whom will authority has been given in his resurrection and ascension—are inevitably linked with our responsibility to be his disciples in the midst of this world. The reassurance we so need is certainly there. As another verse of the hymn puts it:

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
 When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
 By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
 Standing on the promises of God.

In all the storms of doubt and fear, the promise of Christ's presence is there. And it is by the "*living* Word of God" that we shall prevail. It is in hearing and receiving, and applying God's Word. In the midst of seeking with the church through all ages *to go, to baptize, and to teach*. It is being the church in the world that we know the promised presence of our Lord. As a church, we do not "stand on the promises" unless we stand in the doing and the being and the becoming of Christ's disciples.

Our Lord's promised presence is to be received in faith. It is a promise made in the midst of a world that often fails to recognize Christ as Lord. But still Christ says, "All authority has been give to me. Go...baptize...teach...make disciples of all nations. And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age."

It is not some “good ol’ grandfatherly God who won’t let us down” that we worship. It is the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who was, who is, and who is to come. This same God has called us and given us numerous gifts and various tasks to do. It is that God who assures us of his presence as he enables us to be his particular people!

Yes, our Lord beckons the weary and the heavy laden to come unto him for rest. But then in the next breath he says, “Take my yoke upon you!” He affirms, “Peace I leave with you” but only when he has said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” “Lo, behold, I am with you always,” he says to his church, as he instructs us to be in the world teaching, baptizing, making disciples, being the church! Back of most every promise is a responsibility; back of most every comfort, a commission; back of most every timeless assurance, a very timely command!

On this particular Sunday here at Midway I am aware of two ways we are attempting to be and to become Christ’s disciples and to stand on the promises of our Lord. The first is in the giving of our money to Christ through this church, in the form of stewardship. In budgeting and commitment. One of the heated struggles in the primitive church was the mission to the Gentiles. Indeed, the words from Matthew’s Gospel were written in part, to convince the early church that it was Christ’s intention for the good news to be shared with the Gentiles. “Make disciples of *all* nations,” is our Lord’s command. And the money we give to Christ is used, in part, to fulfill this command.

As St. Paul carried the good news to the Gentiles, he used currency as a means of demonstrating practically that Gentiles and Jews were really one in Christ. The collection was a visible demonstration of the truth for which he was struggling. That the Gentile churches should

contribute for the poor at Jerusalem was proof positive that Jew and Gentile were one in Christ. As we give through his church here at Midway, we are enabling the church to go, to baptize, to teach, and to express the oneness we have in Christ in spite of differences in color, language, education, and heritage. Are we making the stewardship of our time, talent, and financial resources the priority it deserves?

The second way we are seeking to continue to be the church and receive the assurances of Christ's promises is by the recent election of Elders. We did not elect men and women to positions of prominence, prestige, or privilege. We elected people to positions of service, responsibility, and leadership. Part of the responsibility of Elders is to enable the church to hear and respond to the cries for help in our community and in the larger world. We should all know that we cannot enjoy "standing on the promises" unless we are actively involved in the fulfillment of those very promises.

Neither of these things of which I speak this Sunday is easy! They are both demanding, difficult, and call for commitment. They call for people who share the joyful possibilities of being God's church here in the Midway community and extending our ministry and mission throughout the world.

In 1953 Dr. Seuss wrote a charming children's book entitled *The Flustards*, who, he says, are the silliest of animals, spending all their time waiting for impossible things and never playing or having fun. He wrote:

Of all the animals I've ever met
 The Flustards, I think are the silliest yet,
 Poor Fustards! They spend every hour every day
 In front of their house in a most stupid way...
 Standing. Just standing. They're waiting, they say.

But waiting for what...?
Well, they stare at the sky
Looking for things that will NEVER come by...
Like very small elephants
Two inches high.
They wait to see things that can't possibly come...
Like five hundred bluebirds
Inside a bass drum.

They stand and wait for things like these:
Steering wheels on apple trees
And roller skates made out of cheese
And peanuts floating in the breeze
And three-cent stamps on bumble bees
And thimbles on the thumbs of fleas
And icicles that never freeze.

They never have fun,
Never play. Never run.
They've never found out that it's terribly dumb
Just to stand around waiting
for things that can't come.

My friends, the church of Jesus Christ is a group of Flustards who decide to stop staring and waiting around, and begin standing on the promises of God, carrying out his Great Commission. And thereby they know those promises fulfilled in themselves, while helping others to stand on the promises as well.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.