

“Keeping It Simple”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Faith Promise Missions Giving

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**“The days are coming when I will write upon your
heart a new covenant.”**

Jeremiah 31:33

Prayer of Preparation

Lord, remind us of the covenant you have made with us in Jesus Christ to share in the life of your Spirit in the world. Amen.

Message

Perhaps you know what KISS is. Not KISS the rock band, but KISS the acronym for Keep It Simple, Stupid. It states that most systems work best when we keep them simple rather than complicated. The phrase comes from an aircraft engineer by the name of Kelly Johnson who used it working in the Navy in the 1960s. Variations of the phrase also include, keep it simple silly, keep it short and sweet, keep it simple and straightforward, keep it simple, sailor. Keep it simple.

I use the phrase to share about our Faith Promise Missions Giving, for it really is simple. By simple, I mean that Faith Promise invites you to step out in faith beyond what you give to the operating budget of the church; and it is simple in that it requires faith, or trust, that God will be true to God’s promise of providing for you and for Christ’s mission in the world.

In this congregation, the Reverend Glen Beck years ago helped to establish this form of giving. Glen had a missionary heart and found ways to challenge people to trust God and go beyond what they thought they could give. Reverend Mike Beck and Reverend Bob Coleman carried on this tradition as well.

I don’t know exactly how much this congregation has given over the last ten years, but a rough, conservative estimate comes to \$3,000,000. The point is not to dote, but to celebrate *what a people in covenant with God can do!*

Those financial resources contribute to the mission to extend the hope and love of Christ, in big ways and small ways, as with our support for the people of Ukraine during Lent, or helping with Habitat for Humanity, or assisting Joseph with school, or serving in a program like Bridges Alliance. It all makes a difference. And it is so simple!

It is why I would invite you to pray and to understand what it means for you to be in covenant with God: to look at what God has done for you and at what you can do for God. What can you do to participate in this work? To be sure, you might not be able to go on a mission trip, and you might not be able to work at the food pantry or help distribute potatoes in December, but you can find ways of providing the financial means to carry out Christ's ministry.

Faith Promise Missions Giving is about how we all can take part and it doesn't have to be difficult. In fact, it really is quite simple. It really is a matter of the heart.

Covenant is Promise

Let me explain. Faith Promise Missions is rooted in the biblical idea of covenant. You will remember that in the scriptures there is the language of covenant or promise. A covenant is the way God promises his mercy to provide for us and to care for us. In the Bible, there are several covenants that God makes with the people.

The first is the covenant God made with Noah and with every living creature in Genesis 9. In this covenant, God promises never again to destroy the earth. Instead, God is going to restore and recreate the earth according to his purposes. God promises in this covenant life not death.

Later in Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah (12:1-3). Through this couple, God will call forth the people of Israel to become a great nation through which God will bless all nations. In this covenant God promises Israel a land and a future, to be a people.

In Exodus, God makes a covenant with Moses through the giving of the law (13-16). In this law, God sets the bounds within which Israel must keep the land and relate to others. It is a law that promises fruitfulness in the face of challenges.

But we are not finished. Following the giving of the law, God makes a covenant with David; through David, God will bless those who follow as rulers of Israel. God will promise to sustain Israel via faithful and obedient leadership.

All these covenants have a common theme, and that theme is promise. God promises to be Israel's God, and to abide with Israel through thick and thin, through obedience and disobedience. After all, God's promises are irrevocable (Romans 11:29), a reminder of the biblical principle that once God calls Israel God provides for Israel. This is the promise at work in scripture: once God calls us, God provides for us, even when we might fall away, even when we think we don't have enough, God will be faithful.

It is the message we hear again, and again in the prophets of the Old Testament, of how God will forgive and restore the people when they go another way. It is the foundation of God's covenant.

In the end, of course, the ultimate answer to God's covenant or promise is Jesus, as Jesus is the new Noah and the new Abraham, the new Moses and the new David. Jesus embodies the salvation of Israel, if not the whole world. Indeed, Jesus is the One who is faithful and obedient. He is the One who won't break covenant with us. As the Lamb of God who suffers in his body the pain of all broken covenants, Jesus works to forgive and reconcile. He is the Good Shepherd who goes after us as lost sheep and brings us into the fold of a new and unbreakable covenant, which is the basis of who we are and what we do as Christians.

New Covenant

And it is this covenant that the prophet Jeremiah in our passage today says that God will write on our hearts, giving us a deep appreciation of the character of God's law as love and justice.

In fact, all that we share in Faith Promise Missions, and all that we do in the life of the church – with respect to care, and service, and worship – is about the simplicity of this covenant: with what God has done for us and with how we can respond out of gratitude, sharing the grace God gives us.

The passage we read a moment ago from Jeremiah speaks about the depths of this covenant. Jeremiah wants the households of Israel and Judah to know that despite their unfaithfulness, despite their disobedience, God will keep his side of the covenant (31:32).

Remember that when Jeremiah is preaching the Babylonians are at the gates of Jerusalem ready to take the people into exile. Remember, too, that over the years, Jeremiah had wept and cried that the nation was lost. Again and again, he had tried to warn the people of the consequences of their inactions and actions.

And yet, Jeremiah still has the hope that God would someday bring the people back and write on their hearts a new promise. That's Jeremiah's hope.

Reflections

Now I don't know if you have a favorite prophet in the Bible, but I think one of the things I love about Jeremiah is his passion for God and the people. Jeremiah loves God and he loves Israel. He sees what the people can become. He knows in his bones God's justice and God's forgiveness. Indeed, there is a reason why Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet":

Jeremiah knows the depths of despair and frustration when people don't align with God's ways. He weeps when the people fall away. He preaches righteousness, for example, but the people do just the opposite. He tells of God's impending judgment, but the people deny that there are problems. He shows them what is going to happen to them, but they ignore his message. He communicates truth, but the people fall for lies and falsehood. He reminds them of the covenants God made with Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, and David, but the people are indifferent.

This is one of the aspects of serving as a prophet (or as a pastor): you are forever stuck between what God wants and what the people want. And it is exhausting. I don't think anyone really volunteers for the job. Even in Jeremiah's case, God says, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born...I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (1:5). Talk about a calling!

To be sure, Jeremiah did not have an easy life in trying to be faithful to God. I suppose that is true of any of us, but I wonder if it might not be helpful to compare Jeremiah's situation to a young student in a classroom when the teacher leaves. The teacher appoints one of the kids to be in charge to watch the room while she is away.

Remember those moments. "Andy, I want you to make sure nothing bad happens while I go down the hallway for a little while."

Well, in some sense, that is what God says to Jeremiah: “Jeremiah, I have appointed you class monitor. You will be my ears and eyes and voice while I am gone.”

And what happens? Folks misbehave. People get mad at Jeremiah for speaking on God’s behalf. Some throw him in stocks and other toss him into a deep well; others call him names, smacking him around. As I said, I don’t think you would volunteer for this.

Invitation

This might be the flipside of keeping it simple: here is what can happen when we forget the basics, when we forget God’s foundational promise, the promise when God says, “I will be your God. I will be faithful to you. I will provide for you. I will guide you and I will love you.”

But then God waits for the reply with his follow up question: “Will you be my people? Will you trust me, obey me, follow me? This doesn’t have to be hard.” And so, God waits.

Not just with Faith-Promise – yes, we are talking about that now, but with our lives! With our actions. With our attitudes and thoughts. With our words. With our resources. With our gifts and talents. How will we respond to such an invite? With gratitude or indifference?

How will we respond to very heart of God’s covenant with us in the face of poverty? In the wake of more gun violence? With the rise of antisemitism and racism? How do we reply as God’s people? With fear or trust? With falsehood or truth? With despair or courage? It really is a simple question and it waits for an answer to the question: What new covenant will you allow God to write on your heart? What promise will you make to God? Amen.