

The impression that one keeps one's word is the foundation of a good name, I think.

Indeed the admonition rises from Jesus' own lips and is repeated by James, "Let your yes be yes, and your no be no."

Keeping one's word is a hallmark of trustworthiness.

Think of your relationships with your spouse or children or parents – untold damage can be done to one's credibility simply by going back on one's word.

I have a dear friend who once told me that the cornerstone of her mother's effectiveness in threat-making was that she never once made an empty threat. Through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, not once was a threat made that was not carried out. So much so was this the case that my friend, when she had a less than stellar first semester at Duke University was threatened by the prospect of living in a rat-infested apartment by her mother in the event that she flunked out of school. And, she said, "I believed her. I was convinced because she'd never *not* delivered on a threat that, in the unlikely event I could find an apartment that wasn't rat-infested, that my mother would in fact, import rats to keep her promise."

There's something to be said for that level of credibility. It must have taken extraordinary discipline to carry out that level of consistency. So often it is easier simply to relent – to go back on an earlier declaration.

As a child, I knew that if I could make a punishment inconvenient for my parents I had better odds of getting my sentence commuted. Mind you, the prospect was still bleak, but the odds improved ever so slightly the more annoying I became in my attempts to subvert the law, as it were.

Lest you think that this is an educational opportunity for parents to torment their children, the lesson extends to spouses and significant others. How many empty or flippant words have been met with the skeptical rejoinder, “promises, promises...”

Once one’s word – or faithfulness – becomes doubtful, what’s left?

Keeping one’s word is the foundation of trust.

Can a relationship truly exist without trust? I suppose it’s possible, but it will always be a limited relationship if there is no trust. Perhaps it can go on as a broken relationship if there is no trust, but to be sure, if trust is absent, relationship is compromised.

Corporations know this too, at least the good ones do. Once a corporation turns its attention from striking a balance between caring for employees and returning a good dividend on investments to focusing entirely on profit and bottom line, workers know it.

Loyalty evaporates. Tenures shorten. It gets into the system.

And of course, a lifetime of quality products is forgotten instantly the minute something is perceived as compromised – ask the PR department of a couple of major auto manufacturers what it takes to rebuild a reputation if a commitment to safety is questioned.

Promises, promises... how empty the phrase can sound if there’s nothing to back it.

One can trace the progression of the Old Testament through the keeping of promises.

I know that for many Christians today the Old Testament is something of a mystery – we know that there are stories that we remember from childhood or popular mythology – everyone knows about Noah’s Ark and the animals coming in two-by-two, we either learned about it Sunday School or heard about it somewhere or saw it in a mural on a wall. Or perhaps we know about the shepherd boy David who took a sling-shot and

killed the giant Goliath – we all know what a David and Goliath Story is, it's where the little guy, the underdog takes on the behemoth and wins. The patience of Job, we know that one, even if we haven't actually read Job. And whether we know any other Psalms or not, we know that the Lord is our shepherd, or at least so we've heard.

But did you know the Old Testament is the story of God keeping promises?

Promises, promises... that's the story of faith.

The Old Testament is the story of God's covenants – and a covenant is a promise.

We can trace our way through God's promises and wind our way through the Bible, starting with God's promise to Noah, the henceforth and forevermore, God will be on the side of humanity – sealed with a rainbow in the sky to remind us of God's promise.

Later, God makes a promise to Abraham, we read about it this morning, that God is going to bless him so that God's way in the world would be clear. Then there's the promise to Moses when God gives the tablets of the Law, that God would be the God of the Hebrews, and of course, later David himself...

The Bible is the story of God keeping promises.

God is serious about keeping promises.

Surely the end of the Genesis passage that we read this morning must have sounded odd?

All of that cut up livestock must surely strike us as unusual – if not downright revolting.

But the dead birds and carved up animals mark a means of striking a covenant, a ritual to show just how serious promise-keeping is.

Both parties of the promise are to walk between the halves of the animals to mark their promises.

The import is clear, I know I've told you before, and it's this: may thus – and more – happen to me if I do not keep this promise. The bigger than animal, the bigger the promise.

What is so striking about the way this covenant unfolds though is this: God does not permit Abraham to perjure himself.

That God intends to make the covenant is clear. That God expects Abraham to keep his covenant is clear. And yet, God declines to permit Abraham to invite destruction onto himself by making a covenant that he is going to break. And so, as Abraham falls into a deep sleep, God walks between the halves of the livestock as a smoldering pot and a flaming torch, making and marking the promise on both of their behalves.

That's the sort of God we worship, the God of promises kept and the God of prevenient mercy.

God expects Abraham to keep his promise and yet God knows it's not such a straight line from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land between the Euphrates and the great river of Egypt. God seems to know that Abraham's walk to the covenant is going to come in fits and starts amidst moments of failure and mistrust.

And is there ever failure and mistrust. Let's just run through the highlights: twice Abraham places his wife Sarah into the harem of foreign kings. Not once, twice. It's sort of hard for God to deliver on the promise of an heir when one-half of the procreating couple is living in another man's harem. Not to put too fine a point on it, but we are looking for *Abraham's* offspring, not that of a foreign king. Then of course, Sarah gets impatient and cooks up the scheme that Abraham could impregnate her maid.

It sounds odd to us, but the idea wasn't outside of common practice in those days... the maid would bear her child, quite literally into Sarah's lap, and then Abraham and Sarah would raise the child as their own... it's not that uncommon today for a couple to have children with one or the other's genetic material but not both...

But that wasn't the promise God made. The promise was that Abraham and Sarah would have an heir of their own issue.

At one turn and the next the promise seems to be on the rocks – no wonder God made the executive decision to implement this promise directly.

Keeping promises is important and so God took the keeping of promises onto God's own self.

God has always been in the promise-keeping business – it's the story of God's promises that comprises the Bible.

But I read a take on that this week that I loved. In The Plan-B God, Mark Achtemeier counts out all of the ways God has had to rescue the promise by resorting to plan-b.

Listen:

“Plan-A at the creation was for Adam and Eve to continue in loving and faithful obedience to God, and to fill the earth with their loving and faithful and obedient offspring. But.... Plan-A wound up on the rocks and from that point on, the entire witness of the Bible is the story of God bringing blessing and redemption and salvation to a fallen world that stands outside the pattern of God's original intention.

Plan-A expectations would assume that the chosen people would arise from an attractive and vigorous couple who could get the clan started with a large number of strong and healthy offspring. God ostentatiously underscores the Plan-B nature of the redemption

by bringing forth the chosen people from Sarah and Abraham, an infertile couple who are long past the years of child-bearing.

Plan-A expectations would assume that the chosen nation would become strong and prosperous and independent. Yet Plan-A winds up on the rocks as God's chosen people fall into slavery and captivity in the land of Egypt. The whole story of Exodus is God's execution of an alternative Plan-B in order to bring blessing."

So much is it the case that God resorts to Plan-B to rescue the promises that are sabotaged and inadvertently subverted that Achtemeier drew the conclusion that indeed even the cross of Jesus stands as a Plan-B rescue of promises pushed dramatically amok. "Note this carefully," he writes, "God's redemption of the world through the cross of Christ is a "Plan-B" arrangement that stands dramatically apart from God's ordinary "Plan-A" religious establishment of the holy temple and the holy priesthood in the holy city of Jerusalem."<sup>1</sup>

That is the God we worship, the God who keeps promises.

The God we worship is the God who will find creative and new ways to make sure that the promises are kept, resorting to plan-b when necessary.

When Jesus shows up on the scene in Mark's Gospel narrative he is introduced with virtually no fanfare, simply the words, "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God..."

It is Matthew and Luke who flesh out the story a bit with their long lists of "begats" and "born ofs."

Each one of those "begats" and "born ofs" is the story of a promise being kept.

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<sup>1</sup> Achtemeier, Mark. The Plan B God. Ecclesio.com, Feb. 6, 2013. Please note that I inverted the order of the quotations for purpose of this sermon.

And if you wonder why it is so important to remember that God is the God of promises kept, it is because someday, sometime, we are all going to need to know that God's Word is good.

Some of you may have noticed that I always use the same charge to close the service on communion Sundays. I'd like to tell you why.

Many years ago, I was awakened early in the morning to a call to the hospital for the grandson of a member of the church I was serving at the time. The young man had been brutally attacked in the middle of the night as he lay sleeping on the couch in the living room of his family's home.

As I rounded the hallway to his room in the intensive care unit where he lay dying, his mother took one look at me, and said, "Get away from me, I don't want to hear any part of what you have to say about God's promises today."

So I slipped back into the background, spoke to his grandmother briefly and left.

For weeks he lingered between life and death but finally the time came to unhook the machines and allow his body to end his suffering.

Finally, his body peacefully gave out and he died.

Some time after his funeral, we had a communion service at the church and as the last hymn was concluding I was struggling for something to say that would wrap up the service before the benediction. As I struggled for the right words, they came to me, you've heard me say them,

"Remember you are God's beloved who have been to Christ's table, and remember that you are God's beloved who will return to Christ's table in this life or in the life that is to come."

With that, I pronounced the benediction and exited the sanctuary to shake hands.

As the line exited the church, I saw his grandmother across the way sitting in a pew.

I slid into the pew behind her and waited.

“That’s the promise,” she said, “Isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied, “That’s the promise.”

Font or table the promise is the same: never, never, never are we outside of God’s promises.

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