

# Sermons at Mac Plymouth

An occasional series sharing the good news

Texts: Luke 17:1-4 and Mark 9:35-39

## “Isaiah ‘Twas Foretold It. . .”

A sermon preached by Rev. Heidi Vardeman

Macalester Plymouth United Church, St. Paul MN

December 23, 2007; fourth Sunday of Advent

*Texts from Isaiah 9, 11, 35, 42, and 52 and from Luke 1: 67.*

No matter how hassled and tired we get, there is something wonderful about the Christmas season. As the days move forward toward Christmas Eve (my favorite), we can feel anticipation, sometimes taste the expectation in the air, as when I was a little girl coming back from church on Christmas Eve, standing in the snow, and looking up into the night sky through the branches of the oak trees in our yard—scouring the sky in the hopes of seeing a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Yearning to see something I so much wanted to be there. There is hope, and yearning, and expectation—which can also make this time of year complicated and complex. Our inner lives can be emotional roller coasters. I know it’s that way for me. This year, for me, it is the first time in several years my immediate family will be together—as my husband and I are now into the sixth month of reconciliation after a separation of three years. But I’m not alone in complicated family relations. I know that you, too, have stories and feelings that are both poignant and painful, and sometimes it can be hard to hold it all together. The joy, and trouble, with holidays is that it all comes together in one, big emotional jolt.

One of the great things about my line of work is that, as I grapple with the personal and familial issues that we all deal with, I get to spend regular work time reading the studying the scriptures. (I even get paid for it!) During these long weeks of Advent, this time in the church year of waiting, waiting, for the birth of Jesus, many of the scriptures include powerful messages from the prophets who Christians interpret as foretelling the coming of Christ. “Lo, how like a rose ever blooming,” we will sing. “Isaiah ‘twas fore told it. . .”

We read the prophets to hear about the promises and about hope. This way of looking at things which developed among the Hebrew people was very different from the way that other ancient Near Eastern religions saw them. When the other deities of the ancient world appeared to people, it was to reveal how things always have been and always will be. The message was: beneath the appearance of change and of suffering there is an abiding, unchanging reality. God is here. Build a shrine. Return here each year at this time. Life will have an anchor. You will be liberated from history into the eternal present. You will be able to endure the way things seems to be, because you will know the secret of the ways things really are.

In contrast, when Yahweh, the God of Israel, appears, it is always to fulfill a promise or to make a new promise. This sets the believer in history. It does not reconcile us to the way things are; it sets us to work to make things different. We live in this tension between promise and fulfillment, between how Isaiah promised the Messiah would come and how when Jesus of Nazareth was actually born.

Listen to the mighty words of the Prophet Isaiah, the promises of God:

From Isaiah 9,

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. . . for to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called, Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

Or from Isaiah 11, which we read responsively with Larry:

*There shall come forth a green sprig of new life from that old dead tree stump that we had left for dead—from among the descendants of King David, the greatest of all the kings of Israel, will come a new and strong branch from that tree, and The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him. . . and with righteousness he shall decide with equity for the meek of the earth. . .*

Promises! Promises!

From Isaiah 35, which Larry read,

*Behold, your God will come with great power. He will come and save you. . . and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

More and more promises! From Isaiah 42:

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
Make straight in the desert a highway for the Lord.  
Every valley will be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low;  
The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.*

And from chapter 53:

*For he grew up. . . like a young plant,  
And like a root from dry ground. . .  
He was despised and rejected by humans, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. . .  
Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . .*

To place the Christmas story into the context of the promises that God made and fulfilled helps us to understand what is going on here. The whole weight of Luke's Christmas story – "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. . ." – is that God kept God's promises. This is the closing line of the Magnificat, the song that Mary sings right after the angel tells her she's pregnant, or the hymn that Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, shouts out:

*God has visited and redeemed God's people. . .  
And was spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets of old. . .  
to perform the mercy promised by our ancestors. . .  
and to remember God's holy covenant,  
the oath which God swore to our father Abraham. . . .*

Come to the manger now and look at the babe. All the promises of God find their Yes in him.

*O little town of Bethlehem. . .  
The hopes and fears of all the years,  
Are met in thee tonight.*

And what's particularly good news for us is that the fulfillment of God's promises has a kind of overflow. God coming to us through this frail human being fills us with assurance that God comes again and again and again in our own time and hope that we will come in final glory at the end of all things.

The *Brief Declaration of Faith* puts it this way:

*In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God kept God's promises.  
All that we can ever hope for was present in Christ.  
But the work of God in Christ is not over.  
God calls us to hope for more than we have yet seen (DF 10:2-7)*

Now, all of that theological stuff is all well and good, we might say. But what difference does it make? How does it relate to the everyday problems of our ordinary lives? Let me tell you. It goes something like this: God makes and keeps promises. We are made in the image of God. Therefore we, too, are makers and keepers of promises. It is hard to think of relationships which are authentically human or deeply personal that are not based on the making and keeping of promises.

In recent weeks, Tom and I have been talking a lot about promises because we have been grappling with the issue of weddings. As some of you may have noted, some of our sister churches have stopped performing weddings for heterosexual couples to protest the injustice that couples of the same gender are not, in Minnesota, allowed to marry. But as we have discussed our mixed feelings about the legal part of doing weddings – signing the marriage license and all that, which has always seemed a little weird to me, a minister, acting an agent of the state – we wholly affirm the power or

goodness of two people making promises to each other and working hard to keep those promises. In fact, this is a prime reason both Tom and I support equal marriage rights for all couples, because it is good, in fact, God-like, for people to make and keep promises—like the promises that God made about sending a Messiah way back then; God keeping that promise; and assuring us that the work of God through Christ is not over, but that we are called to get to work to change things to create more just and loving social relations and family arrangements configured in new ways that we may never have seen before.

Let us gather around the manger and look at the Babe. All the promises of God find their Yes in him. Then let us raise our eyes and look at each other. We are not God and we will not be able to keep all our promises. But let us try, and forgive and accept each other as we stumble along, making and breaking and repairing our promises along the way. And let us work to make it possible for people to be able to make the right promises in appropriate ways, and then live as a community, caring for one another, and offering forgiveness and support as we struggle in our imperfect ways to keep promises. Let us try. Because that's what human relationships are all about.