

December 28, 2014
TEXT: Luke 2:22–40
TITLE: Promises Fulfilled

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’),²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;^{} this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.^{*} 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon^{*} came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,²⁸ Simeon^{*} took him in his arms and praised God, saying,*

29 ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant^{} in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’*

*33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.
34 Then Simeon^{*} blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’*

36 There was also a prophet, Anna^{} the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage,³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child^{*} to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Agreements, oaths, pledges, or vows – we have all made them; whether to love, respect, and be faithful to a spouse or partner; to cherish, nurture, discipline and provide for a child; to respect, hold dear and always keep a friend’s secrets; or as a child to be obedient, do our very best and to always share. We have all made promises. As the people of God we have promised to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind and with all our strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. However, we

have all fallen short from time to time and not kept the promises we pledged to keep. It has been said that promises are made to be broken, some promises are too good to be true, and Mark Twain stated, "better a promise broken than none at all." However, I don't believe anyone makes a promise with their fingers crossed behind their back, intentionally planning to mislead or just outright lie to another. I'm glad that as the people of God, we have the assurance that the promises of God are yes and amen; and we can trust that when God makes a promise, it will be fulfilled.

Imagine my surprise yesterday when I opened the Local section of the Post-Gazette and saw an article entitled, "Promise Fulfilled." The article told the story of five African-American men, in their early twenties, who at the age of four, met at a Northside neighborhood community center. The article stated: "they sealed their friendship over basketball and homework and forged a common direction that defies stereotypes." These young men had an unspoken agreement that they were all going to graduate high school and college. Each of the five kept and fulfilled their promises to each other. Holding one another accountable, they all graduated college, are employed and now giving back to their community by volunteering and mentoring others. Each of the young men spoke of the importance of the support, encouragement and accountability they held one another to, to not just survive, but to strive and see to fruition the promise they had made to one another, 20 years ago.

In our passage today, God's promises are all fulfilled. God's promise to never leave nor forsake, God's promise of everlasting grace and mercy, God's promise of loving kindness and faithfulness, and God's promise to send the Messiah, are all manifested in the birth of Jesus, the Christ child. Luke gives us a rare glimpse into the childhood of Jesus. Rare, because the Gospels are not a chronological biography, in them we learn very little about Jesus' youth, beyond his conception and birth. The Gospels are primarily kerygmatic narratives proclaiming the Good news, recorded to undergird and strengthen our faith in Christ.

However, the Gospel of Luke substantiates and illustrates the fact that Jesus was indeed born a Jew among Jews, living under the law of Moses. Paul concurs stating, in Galatians 4:4-5, Jesus was "born of woman and born under the law, so that he might redeem those who were born under the law." God promised Israel a Messiah would come and be their salvation, freeing them from the bondage of sin, both committed by and against them. God's promise was fulfilled in the birth of the Christ child, just not in the way the people expected. The circumstances of Jesus' conception and birth were completely opposite of what was anticipated or expected by the Jewish religious leaders of the day.

The move of God is often revolutionary – a young woman overshadowed by the Holy Spirit gives birth to the Savior of the world; shepherds minding their flocks by night receive the angel of the Lord who tells them of the Messiah's birth in the town of Bethlehem, and they find him sleeping in a manger; five African-American, young men, holding one another accountable, desiring more than society's expectations for them,

completing college, gainfully employed and now volunteering in the very community that nurtured and molded them. All promises fulfilled.

The faithfulness of Mary and Joseph are exemplified in the Gospel of Luke. They were devoted Jews, obedient to and fulfilling both their civic and sacred responsibilities. Traveling to Bethlehem to be counted in the census in spite of Mary being great with child; fulfilling their civic responsibility, resulted in the fulfillment of prophesy and promise, the Messiah, from the House of David was to be born in Bethlehem. God kept and protected Mary and Joseph as they travelled. When turned away at the inn, God provided humble accommodations for them to rest and the child to be born. Later, travelling to the temple, to fulfil their sacred responsibility of Mary's purification and the dedication of their son to God, the reception of Mary, Joseph and Jesus is diametrically opposite of how they were received in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph could have made the decision to give up on their sacred responsibility, because it would cost them the resources they needed to survive, yet they remained committed to the rituals of the faith and made the trip to the temple. Many are like Jesus' family living with and among us today, observant and obedient to the commands of God, yet financially strained and marginalized, with inadequate resources or means to acquire necessities, much less wants; lacking the skills, example, history or knowledge needed to navigate, let alone break into what is sometimes a closed structure of societal success. Yet, God's faithfulness opens closed doors, softens hardened hearts, and makes ways out of no ways. God's promises are always fulfilled.

Just as Mary, Joseph and the child enter the temple, Simeon, a seasoned man of faith, with a deep relationship with God, a priest, who has been anticipating the consolation, the promise of Israel all of his days, recognizes Jesus as God's anointed Messiah. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon with the frailties of old age draped over him, tenderly and lovingly cradles the infant in his arms, this most wanted child, the hope of the ages, the yearning of all his life, this baby - God's shrewdest device was the promise of God fulfilled. Simeon could now die in peace, calmly, confidently. Yet, Simeon's God appointed work was not concluded, he warns Mary, this child is destined for the falling and rising of many and your soul will be pieced. As with the birth of every child, we anticipate joys and sorrow, disappointments as well as pride, yet Simeon's warning was ominous. And, as he made his pronouncement, Anna, great with age, a prophet who had dedicated her life to continual worship, fasting and praying in the temple enters and begins to praise God for the one she had awaited. Just a child – but hardly safe and harmless, the promise fulfilled that provoked and still provokes a crisis for all people of every generation both Jew and Gentile: to follow this child and know the fullness of God's love, the fulfillment of God's promise, or to reject him and ultimately fall. How we respond to this child, this one person decides everything.

The promises of God are evident each and every day, yet we often grow weary in waiting and well-doing, we become impatient and try to become the designers of our own destiny. Some have said that religion is an opiate for the masses, a panacea for the weak minded. But I contend that there was nothing weak about Mary and Joseph and their conviction to be obedient to God, even when doing so was socially

inappropriate, physically difficult and financially restrictive. Neither Simeon nor Anna grew weary even in their old age, they did not grow tired waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled; they continued daily in prayer, meditation and worship.

Brothers and sisters, it is possible to become discouraged about the injustice, violence, need and ungodliness we witness every day. This year which is about to end has been difficult. We've seen deadly disease ravage countries in West Africa; children have been kidnapped, abused and brutalized; planes filled with people have disappeared or been shot down; we experienced one of the coldest winters on record; black lives in some communities don't matter and are expendable, the unrest in the Middle East continues. I'm reminded that God did not promise that the world would be humane and just, that we would not suffer setbacks or disappointments. God promised we are to fear not, for God has redeemed us, called us by name, we are God's; and when we pass through the waters, God will be with us, and the rivers shall not overwhelm us, when we walk through the fire, we shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume us (Isaiah 43:2,3). For the Lord our God, the Holy One of Israel, is our Savior—Promise fulfilled. Amen.