

Promises Made: Advent in the Old Testament

Unbreakable Covenants (Jeremiah 33:14-26)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on November 30, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Prophecy is a popular storytelling device that you'll often find in books and films. You have prophecies that speak of the one who will bring balance to the force (*Star Wars*). The one who will end the war against machines (*The Matrix*). The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord (*Harry Potter*). Of gold that doesn't glitter, a wanderer who is not lost, the crownless again becoming king (*Lord of the Rings*). Of a ruler with a frozen heart (*Frozen*).
- ❖ The Bible itself is full of prophecies. Predicting events to come. Foretelling the downfall of some and the exaltation of others. We see God communicating these kind of prophecies through human agents known as prophets. Jeremiah was one of them.
 - ▶ But when the Bible wants to underline the reliability of a foretold action, the certainty that a future event will necessarily take place, it sets forth more than just a prophecy. It give you a prophecy built upon a promise. **A promise can offer much more assurance and much more reliability than a mere prophecy or prediction.** That's because a promise is backed by a person and the strength of his or her character.
- ❖ Think about the difference between my wife opening up a fortune cookie that tells her, "*You will have a long and faithful marriage*" versus my wife hearing me promise I will never leave her or forsake her. My promise is going to mean so much more than a prophecy, a prediction.
 - ▶ Likewise, when God wanted his people in the Old Testament to know with deep assurance that he is coming to rescue them, he didn't just give a prophecy. He gave them a promise. He made promises. He bound himself to unbreakable covenants.
- ❖ This is what our Advent series is all about. *Advent* means the coming or arrival. We're looking at passages that prophesy the coming of God's Messiah, his Christ, his Anointed One. Who was coming – not to bring balance to the force or to simply to end all wars – but to bring *shalom* to the earth. To liberate people from bondage, not just to imperial powers, but to internal corruptions. To free them from the power and penalty of sin in their hearts.
 - ▶ **That's what all the advent prophecies are about. But undergirding them are advent promises.** Promises resting in the strength of God's character. What we want to do in our Advent series is to dig into the various *promises made* in the OT. All for the purpose of celebrating God's *promises kept* in the unlikeliest of manners, in the humble birth of a child, born in a barn, in the little town of Bethlehem.
 - **And the big takeaway is the faithfulness of God.** That's one of the primary lessons we can draw from Advent. In our passage in particular, in Jeremiah 33, is all about how faithful God is to his promises.
- ❖ By Jeremiah's day, the nation of Israel was in dismay. Corruption and idolatry was rampant within. Foreign powers surrounded them without. The northern kingdom had long been destroyed. The southern kingdom of Judah was hanging on by a thread. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had already sacked Jerusalem once, deposed the rightful king, and set up a puppet king in his place (cf. 2 Kg. 24:8-17). Judah was under the shadow of a great imperial power. The glory days of Israel when King David and his son Solomon reigned were long gone.

- ❖ But no matter how bad things look. No matter how desperate you get or discouraged you are. The message of Jeremiah 33 is simply this: **God will keep his promises no matter what.** He has entered and bounded himself into covenants that he will not break.
 - ▶ **In fact, according to our passage, the sun will stop shining and the stars will fall from the sky before God fails to keep a single promise that he has made.** That's how sure you can be that God will pull through. That he won't fail you.
 - This morning I want to walk you through Jeremiah 33:14-26 and I hope to show you four things. I want to show you a) God's promises made. b) God's promises questioned, c) God's promises assured, and d) God's promises kept.

Promises Made

- ❖ Our passage begins in v14 and presumes the reader has knowledge of certain promises that the Lord made with his people in the past. *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”*
 - ▶ But let's not presume that we're all working from the same reference point. So what promise did the LORD make to the houses of Israel and Judah?

- ❖ If we read on, we see that it has to do with a king. In vv15-16, God says that in those days when my promises are kept, I will *“cause a righteous Branch to spring up for [King] David”*. Picture the imagery. Earlier in vv10 and 12, the Promised Land is described as a wasteland. There's no vegetation. There's nothing growing.
 - ▶ **But then picture this one little green shoot sprouting up from the ground. A little Branch springing up from the dirt.** That's what it'll be like when, in those hopeless, wasteland-type days, God raises up a new king to rule on the throne of David.
 - He'll be a righteous king, one who'll execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days, under this King reigns, the people of Jerusalem will dwell securely. The city of God will be so closely identified with its righteous King that the city itself will be given the name: *“The Lord is our righteousness”*.

- ❖ And then in vv17-18, the promise that God mentioned in v14 is now clearly identified. It's actually a two-fold promise that he has in mind where basically God is promising that Israel's monarchy and priesthood will continue on no matter what. No matter how bleak things are right now, they'll last forever. That's God's promise.
 - ▶ Look at v17, *“For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.”* That's also known as the **Davidic covenant**. Now where is that found in Scripture?

- ❖ You find it in **2 Samuel 7:16**, where the Lord covenants with David and promises that *“your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”* (cf. Ps. 89:3-4). **So in this Davidic covenant, God has placed the responsibility upon himself to ensure the continuation of David's throne.** The line of Davidic kings will never be extinguished. His throne shall be established forever.

- ❖ But not only will the monarchy continue, so will the priesthood. Look at v18. *“And the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever.”* (v18) Call this the **Levitic covenant**, a covenant with the priestly tribe of Levi. They were to minister as priests behalf of their brothers.
 - ▶ Their permanent priesthood was established in the book of **Numbers 25:13**. That’s where Phinehas the Levite, the grandson of Aaron the first high priest, made atonement for the sins of the people, halting a plague that was ravaging them. So to him and his offspring, the Lord made a covenant of a perpetual priesthood. **So just as there will always be a righteous king to reign over God’s people, there will be a faithful priest to intercede on behalf of God’s people.**

- ❖ Now there’s actually another covenant referenced in this Jeremiah passage. It’s found in v22, *“As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the offspring of David my servant, and the Levitical priests who minister to me.”*
 - ▶ The Lord is conflating three different covenants. He’s combining the Davidic and Levitic covenants with what’s known as the **Abrahamic covenant**. The promise he made to Abraham in **Genesis 15:5**, when he brought Abraham outside to look up at the night sky and he said, *“Look toward heaven, and number the stars if you are able to number them. . . So shall your offspring be.”* (cf. Gen. 22:17)

- ❖ **This covenant in Genesis 15 is special because God demonstrates in that same chapter his unconditional commitment to keep his promises no matter what.** In ancient times, when two parties would enter into a covenant with each other, they would sacrifice animals, perhaps a heifer or goat or ram, and cut them in half laying the pieces side by side.
 - ▶ And then as the two parties affirm their promises and obligations to each other, they would walk together between the cut halves of the sacrificed animals as if to say, *“Let the same fate be to me if I don’t keep my end. Let me be cursed like these animals if I break covenant with you.”*

- ❖ Well as we read on, God instructs Abraham to sacrifice a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. To cut them in half and arrange the pieces. And right at the point in the ceremony where you expect both parties to accept their covenant duties and covenant curses and walk through the cut halves together, we read in v12 that *“a deep sleep fell on Abram”*.
 - ▶ **And then God makes this unilateral, unconditional covenant with him.** We read in v17, *“¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.”*

- ❖ See what happened? God made that ceremonial walk by himself. Abraham was fast asleep. **God took all the covenant duties upon himself as well as the covenant curses.** He was essentially saying, *“This covenant is unbreakable. Not even Abraham’s failure or the failure of his offspring will break it. If this covenant were to ever fail, then let me be accursed.”*

- ▶ That's how strong of a promise we're talking about. It's not like the kind we make. It's not fickle and uncertain like ours. No, when God makes a promise it's forged in fire and covered with blood. His promises are sure.

Promises Questioned

- ❖ But apparently by Jeremiah's day, not everyone shared this conviction. God's commitment to his promises was being questioned. The people were starting to doubt. Why? Why were his promises questioned?
 - ▶ We've briefly mentioned their dire circumstances. **Just the fact that David's kingdom had already split into two was troubling enough.** God's covenant to David about his kingdom and his throne stretching forever had assumed one kingdom under one throne. Now there were two of each, and by this point, the northern kingdom and throne had been wiped out by the Assyrians. There was only Judah left and only the throne in Jerusalem.
- ❖ **And besides that, at the time of this prophecy, there was no rightful heir on the throne.** The king in Jerusalem at the time was Zedekiah, and he was not the rightful heir. He was the uncle of the rightful heir.
 - ▶ This can be a bit complicated, so try to follow along as I explain the history. Towards the end, there was a king over Judah named **Jehoiakim** (2 Kg. 23:36-24:7). During his reign, the Babylonian empire was on the rise, and Jehoiakim eventually become a vassal servant to Babylon. But he rebelled and incurred the wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar. Jehoiakim died soon after and his son **Jehoiachin** took the throne. Three months into the young king's reign, the Babylonians returned and captured Jerusalem taking King Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. In his place, Nebuchadnezzar installed the boy's uncle, **Zedekiah** (2 Kg. 24:8-17).
 - **So at the time of this prophecy, the rightful son of David, the heir to the throne was locked up in a Babylonian dungeon.** Yes, there was a king in Jerusalem, but he was an illegitimate one.
- ❖ And what's worse, the line of David from Jehoiachin and on had been cursed. Turn to **Jeremiah 22:28**. Here Jeremiah addresses someone named Coniah. That's short for Jechoniah, which is an alternate name for Jehoiachin. Listen to what's said about the king, *"²⁸Is this man Coniah a despised, broken pot, a vessel no one cares for? Why are he and his children hurled and cast into a land that they do not know? ²⁹O land, land, land, hear the word of the LORD! ³⁰Thus says the LORD: "Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah."*
- ❖ Do you see the dilemma? Jeremiah says you might as well consider this man childless because none of his children will succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah. Is that a problem? Yes, that's a problem – a huge problem!

- ▶ How is God going to keep the promise he made to David? How can God say that none of the sons of Jehoiachin will succeed in sitting on the throne of David and yet still say that David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne?

Promises Assured

- ❖ This is the dilemma that's vexing the people of God. This is why many are disillusioned and giving up on God. They need some assurance that God is still good for his promises. Because as it stands, the glory of Israel is gone. The glory of Judah is waning. The rightful king has been taken captive and his line has been cursed.
 - ▶ Granted, at this point the temple still stood and sacrifices were being made. But what I didn't mention earlier is that when Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, he also removed all the treasures from the temple of the LORD and stripped bare all the gold. And he took captive all the officials, which would've included all those in the high priestly class. So granted there were still Levitical priests in place offering sacrifices, but they were sorely depleted in numbers and the glory of the temple was defaced.

- ❖ Things were not looking good at all. Just imagine their discouragement. All the structures of stability that they had put their hope and confidence in were being thrown out the window.

The rug was being pulled right out from under them. *Do you know the feeling?*

 - ▶ It's like your spouse telling you that he or she has had enough. They want out. They're breaking their vows. Or it's like your parents telling you that they're splitting. They're getting a divorce. The promises you took for granted, the covenants you just assumed would last forever, are suddenly ripped away.
 - **But now imagine it's God's promises that appear to be broken. It's his covenants now in doubt.** You thought you could always count on him. You thought you could always bank on his promises. But now, judging by circumstances, you're no longer sure.

- ❖ Yet, in the midst of all this bad news, it says back in chapter 33:19, *"¹⁹The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: ²⁰'Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, ²¹then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers. ²²As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the offspring of David my servant, and the Levitical priests who minister to me.'"*
 - ▶ This is powerful, poetic language. **It's like saying I'll break my covenant when pigs fly. When hell freezes over. When the sun rises in the west. When the stars come crashing down from the sky.** That's when I'll fail to keep my promises.

- ❖ I know some of you are in a dark season of life. You're in the dead of winter where the night seems to stretch on forever. **But the LORD is saying that his promises are as sure as the sun rising in the morning.** You never question when you lay your head down at night that the sun will be on your face in the morning. So why question God and his faithfulness?

- ❖ Jeremiah writes in **Lamentations 3:22-23**, "²²*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;* ²³*they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*" Great is God's faithfulness. His steadfast love never ceases. His mercies are new every morning. **Just as sure as morning arrives, you can be sure of God and his promises.**
 - ▶ If you read on in vv23-24, the LORD notes that some have despised the two clans, the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, counting them cursed and rejected by God. The LORD reiterates that his covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, his covenant to David, are as sure as his "*covenant with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth.*" And he ends v26 with another promise, "*For I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them.*" His mercies are new every morning.
- ❖ Christian, this promise is yours too. No matter how bad things look, God has not rejected you or cursed you. It doesn't matter what circumstances looks like or what the world thinks. What matters is that God made a promise to you.
 - ▶ He entered into a covenant relationship with you – to be for you not against you, to love you steadfastly, to be with you always to the end of the age. **He made vows just like a groom to his bride.** He has put his reputation – he's put his life! – on the line. So you can be sure that he's good for his word.

Promises Kept

- ❖ And the good news for us today is that God proves his faithfulness in a clearer and much more powerful way than just by pointing to **general revelation**. He doesn't point to creation and its fixed order and have us derive assurances from just that.
 - ▶ Now we are the recipients of **special revelation**, of the Gospel message, that proves once for all that God is a promise-keeping God. Against all odds, amidst all doubt, God did it. He kept covenant with Abraham, with David, with the priesthood – all through the miraculous birth of a baby boy over two thousand years ago.
 - Like I said, this is what Advent is all about. It's about proving God's faithfulness, celebrating God's faithfulness, preaching God's faithfulness to our own weary and troubled souls.
- ❖ So think back to **Jeremiah 22:30**. Picture the Israelites. Put yourself in their shoes. Feel their tension. Remember the curse in v30, "*Write this man down as childless . . . for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah.*"
 - ▶ But if we continue reading on into chapter 23 we come across an identical passage where the LORD promises to raise up for David a righteous Branch, a righteous king – even though Jehoiachin's line has been cursed (cf. Jer. 23:5-6).
- ❖ **How does God work all this out without flat-out contradicting himself?** Turn with me to **Matthew 1:1**. The Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus Christ, who in v1 is identified as "*the son of David, the son of Abraham*". Look in v11 and you see the name **Jechoniah** (i.e. Jehoiachin), and there's mention of the deportation to Babylon. And in v12 it goes on to list the sons of Jehoiachin/Jechoniah. And what we see is the prophetic curse holding true.

- ▶ None of his sons sat on the throne of David. Not his son Shealtiel nor his son Zerubbabel nor Abiud after him. And so on and so forth. The curse of Jeremiah 22:30 seems to be holding a steady pattern. **None of these names of rightful heirs to David's throne ever rise up from obscurity.**
- ❖ But then in v16, the steady pattern is disrupted. There's been this pattern of "A the father of B" (or literally "A begat B"). But it's suddenly broken between Joseph and Jesus. *"And Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ."*
 - ▶ Because as the story goes, Joseph did not beget Jesus like the rest of the fathers. Mary begat Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. **God is apparently doing something new with this last son of David.** Jesus is unique.
- ❖ He has legal claim to the throne. He's considered the firstborn son of Joseph. But what's unique is that Jesus is *not* a biological son of Joseph and therefore he's *not* a biological son of Jehoiachin. This is how God's promises work themselves out – in the Christmas story, in the virgin birth of Christ.
 - ▶ **God raises up this Righteous Branch for David by miraculously conceiving him in the womb of a virgin.** He does all of this without contravening any other promise he's made, even the promise to curse the line of Jehoiachin.
- ❖ Then we're told in the book of Hebrews that Israel's monarchy and priesthood converge in the person of Christ. **The author of Hebrews goes to great lengths to demonstrate how the Levitical priesthood finds its fulfillment in Christ.** Though he was of the tribe of Judah and not of Levi, he was of the order of Melchizedek – a superior priesthood to Levi, a perpetual priesthood that fulfills God's promise to Phinehas and his line.
 - ▶ **Hebrews 7:23-25** says, *"²³The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴but he [Jesus] hold his priesthood permanently because he continues forever. ²⁵Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."*
- ❖ And lastly we see the covenant to Abraham – the promise of offspring as many as the stars in the heavens and sands on the shore – fulfilled in Christ. We see a picture of this fulfillment in **Revelation 7:9**. John is given a glimpse of heaven and he writes, *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."*
- ❖ **The sons and daughters of Abraham will be greater than anyone can count. God's covenant holds true.** Even when his people are faithless and break covenant. God remains faithful and keeps covenant.
 - ▶ Even if it means taking the covenant curses upon himself, that is, the curses we incur due to our sin and disobedience. **God willingly bears curse because he is determined to keep covenant.**

- ❖ So when you consider Christ on the cross, cursed and condemned, what you're looking at is a promise-keeping God putting his own life on the line to keep his promises to you.
 - ▶ The Lamb of God was sacrificed. Just like those animals cut in half, Jesus became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). And by his shed blood, he fulfilled the old covenant and established a new one – a new covenant enacted on better promises (cf. Heb. 8:6).

- ❖ Jeremiah makes mention of this new covenant in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**. *“³¹Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . ³³For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”*

- ❖ This is an open covenant. It's not exclusive like the old one between God and one nation, one ethnicity, one people group. No, God extends an invitation to all nations, all tribes and tongues. **And so every day hundreds, perhaps thousands, enter into this new covenant with God by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.**
 - ▶ If you can't say with confidence that the Lord God is your God and you are his people, then the invitation still stands for you to enter this covenant. You do that by trusting your life in Jesus' hands.
 - Then all of the covenant blessings are yours – the forgiveness of sins, the personal knowledge of the Ineffable One, the law of God being written on your heart. All is yours in Christ.

- ❖ *What kind of doubts are you dealing with this Advent season? What aspect of God or promise of God are you wrestling with?* If your faith is weak, if you're going through a dark night of the soul, then lift up your eyes to the dawn because it's surely coming. God's promises are sure. They are strong. And they will never fail you.