

Homily, St. Andrew's - 8:00am
Advent 4, Sunday, December 21, 2014
"The Story of God's Promise"

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

You may have been wondering for a few weeks now what all <this> is about! Each of the items on this table represent a key moment in the relationship between God and God's people through promises of God from the beginning of time until just before Jesus' coming. Remembering the series of covenants is one way for us to prepare in hope for the fulfillment of the promise of salvation through a Messiah. Our act of remembrance puts the story of Jesus into a larger context - the context of the many years of relationship between God and God's people - that had gone before. This larger context helps us to understand the coming of Jesus as both a unique and decisive moment in history, as well as being part of a loving God's pattern of grace and imperative for fullness of life.

The story begins at creation, with the people. As Genesis chapter 1 nears its end, after 6 days of creating the world, God looks over all that has been created and declares it, not just good as the pattern had been for 5 days, but instead "very good." It is not a promise or covenant, strictly speaking, but still, "in the beginning," God created all life, including us, and declared it "**very good.**" (1:31)

Unfortunately, it didn't stay "very good." Things went well for a while, sure, but *eventually troubles came*. People didn't do as God said so God sent a flood that destroyed almost all of creation. When it was finally all over, God looked at what was left, the destruction and death, and decided that from then on, mass destruction would not be on the table as an option. No matter how bad things got, God promised in Genesis chapter 9: "**As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that *never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.***" (9:9-11) God goes on to put a symbol in the sky - a rainbow - as a sign to seal the covenant... the one-sided, unilateral promise that makes it solely about God's character and God's choice.

The people who remained, the remnant that came through Noah and his family, went on to re-build their lives and their community. Things went well for a while, but *eventually troubles came*. How would God get the people to be the family, the community, God had created them to be? The people had scattered and in the dispersion, the people weren't acting together as God wanted. And so God found one man - a good man - and decided that through him, God would create a nation who would be his people. So "***the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.'***" (12:1-2) It seemed like a good plan but as time went on, Abram and his wife Sarai remained childless. How could a nation grow from such barrenness? Abram asked "no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "***Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.***" Then he said to him, "***So shall your descendants be.***" And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." (15:4-6) And so we have a

star here to remind us that even when it seems impossible, God finds a way to keep every promise.

God's people multiplied and become the community God wanted. And things went well for a while, but *eventually troubles came* and the community ended up as slaves in Egypt. This time, the troubles went on for years and years, until one day, God found a strong and humble man - one man - to lead God's people out of Egypt and into a good land - the Promised Land. The journey was difficult and took a long time because along the way, God decided to teach them how to live together as God's people by giving them a set of guidelines, starting with the 10 Commandments.

God had already claimed these people as his very own, making one-sided, unilateral promises for life. And now the people needed to claim God as their own by grabbing hold of God's promise of life and following God's way. The hands off approach hadn't worked and so this time God got much more specific, and this time, the covenant was bi-lateral requiring the people's participation along with God's. The covenant made through Moses was a promise that required teamwork: "I will be your God and you will be my people." The Torah wasn't just a list of rules or laws, it was a road map to fullness of life for all of God's people. As the time drew near for the people to enter *the land* God promised, God makes the dual responsibility clear, saying: "***I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.***" (Deut 30:19-20)

The people moved into the Promised Land and they did their best to live up to their side of the covenant. Things went well for a while, but *eventually troubles came*. The people wanted to be more like other communities, other nearby nations, who had kings to guide and rule them. After much debate, God finally agreed that they too could have a king. After one misstep with Saul, God then chose one man, the young man David, and made another unilateral promise: "***He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.***" (2 Sam 7:13-16) And so David's *house* and God's *house* were connected forever.

With a kingdom established, things went well for a while, but *eventually troubles came*. The people fought with one another and David's kingdom soon split in 2 - half in the north and half in the south. The neighbours of the northern kingdom grew strong and took them over, so half the kingdom was no more. And then the worst troubles of all came. The Empire of Babylon grew even stronger than the Assyrians before them and took over the whole land, and the whole kingdom, destroying everything... including the house of God (Solomon's Temple) and all of Jerusalem. It was a very sad time. The people were either killed or exiled to Babylon and dark times descended on God's people. But as before, as in Egypt... God had not forgotten the people and God promised that the troubles wouldn't last forever, through the writing of prophets like Isaiah: "***Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.***" (Is 40:1-2) Like a plant that had been cut off, so was Israel,

but *the bulb* and the roots remained buried under the land, waiting for the right time to spring up once more.

Eventually, the time did come and God's promise of renewal and restoration came to fulfillment, just like all the other promises. The people went back to Jerusalem and re-built their homes, their lives and God's temple. It was never again the way it had been in the glory days of King David, living under the control of the Persian Empire, but still, things went well for a while as the community worked out how to be God's people once more. But *eventually troubles came*. The Persian Empire gave way to the Greeks under Alexander and then the Romans rose to power over the whole area. Many of God's people remained faithful, but time and troubles had worn down their understanding of all God's teaching and promises along the way. A new promise was needed to remind the people of God's unending grace along the way, and a new means of fulfillment was needed to shock the world once more with God's commitment to life. And so God found one faithful person, this time a young woman - through whom another promise would be born: "[An] angel said to her, ***'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'***" (Luke 1:30-33)

This is the promise that brings us to today and our anticipation of the beginning of the next part of the story. Like all of God's promises that have gone before, we have hope and faith that this promise too will be fulfilled - probably when we don't even see it coming - out of God's great love for us. May God's promise find fulfillment in your life this Christmas, as God is born anew in your heart, in our church and in our world.