

Promises Fulfilled

Jeremiah 33:14-16

One of the climactic scenes in the film *The Two Towers*, the middle film of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, is the end of the battle of Helm's Deep. The elves and humans have fought a long, losing battle, and are about to be overrun by orcs. They saddle up for one final charge, just as dawn is breaking. As they charge, though, they hear more horns. They look up to the east, and see that Gandalf had kept the promise he'd made to Aragorn. "Look to my coming on the first light of the fifth day, at dawn look to the east." The wizard, along with a group of horsemen he's recruited, charge down the hill and defeat the orc army. The battle of Helm's Deep is won because Gandalf kept his word and came to save them.

We may not be facing an army of orcs, but we're still waiting for rescue to come. Some of you are waiting for the rescue that comes in two weeks as the semester comes to an end. Others of you are waiting for rescue from some dread disease or other health condition. Others of you are waiting for rescue from financial hardships, an overly full calendar, or loneliness. Whoever you are, whatever stage of life you're in, we're all waiting for rescue.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned for resisting the Nazis in Germany during World War 2, wrote "A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes - and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent." We are waiting for something that we cannot do on our own.

In the first verse of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" that we just sang, we sing about ransoming captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears. One of the most pivotal events in the history of the people of Israel in the Old Testament is the exile. Although some were taken away in the preceding century, in 587 BC the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem and take the people away into exile and captivity. Far from home, they wondered if they'd been abandoned by God. And so they mourned in lonely exile, waiting for their savior to appear. They knew they needed rescue that they couldn't get on their own.

Jeremiah knew they needed rescue. He's often known as the weeping prophet, because of how difficult his

ministry was. He'd spent most of his ministry warning people of God's judgment that was to come, of how they'd be taken into exile if they didn't return to following God and his covenant. Jeremiah spent his whole ministry preaching for the people of God to turn back to God, but they didn't listen. He faced ridicule and scorn and persecution from almost everyone he talked to. Instead of listening to Jeremiah's true prophecies from God, they listened to false prophets who told them to trust in their own military might and the alliances they had made.

Jeremiah got thrown in jail for warning the people of Israel that Babylon would conquer them, and when he was proven right, the people rewarded him by throwing him into an open well. Jeremiah grieved not only for the people who would undergo such oppression and exile, but also for himself, because no one would listen to what he could see so clearly. In fact, a whole genre of literature, known as the jeremiad, developed, where the author bitterly laments the state of society and its morals and always contains a prophecy of society's imminent downfall.

But Jeremiah isn't all doom and gloom. He also wrote messages of hope, looking ahead to when God would fulfill his promises of restoration. He looked ahead to where God would rescue his people, and bring them back to their land where they would be able to live in peace and safety. Even though the people of Israel had broken their promises to God, God wouldn't break his promises to them.

We live in a world of broken promises. We've come to expect that when politicians promise to fix the economy, or lower the debt, or shrink government, they will end up failing to keep those promises. When half of marriages end in divorce, we come to expect that "til death do us part" isn't a promise that will always be kept. Friends promise to be true to us, but gossip behind our backs. Broken promises are what we expect.

Because of that, when promises are made and kept, when statements become reality, we embrace them, remember them. One of the most famous stories of World War II is the story of General Douglas MacArthur, commander of US forces in the Philippines. Forced to retreat in the face of Japanese advances,

MacArthur famously vowed to return. When he kept that promise and returned with liberating troops two years later, he said “I have returned. By the grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil.” General MacArthur kept his promise. But neither Gandalf’s return nor General MacArthur’s return ended their wars. Many more battles would have to be fought, more people killed, before the enemies would be defeated. But their efforts were the first step in what would lead to victory.

Jesus’ coming that first Christmas didn’t end the war, either. The baby lying in a manger is the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus was born to die for our sins, to begin God’s work of fixing the world from all of the ways it’s been broken by sin. His death on the cross defeated death once and for all, and saves us from our sins. But sin, death, and the devil don’t realize they’re defeated yet, and so we continue to struggle against them. Our war against sin, death, and the power of the devil continues. But we know that Jesus’ second coming will end that war. When He comes again, He will “wipe away every tear,” and there will be no more death or pain (Revelation 21:4), and everything will be fixed for good. God has promised to return, and we know God keeps His promises.

The same God who has kept his promises in the Bible is the same God who keeps his promises today. The same God promises that in spite of our failings and fallings that he will hear us and bless us and direct us and keep us as his own. Through Jesus, because Jesus died and rose just as he said he would, you have been forgiven. That’s a promise that has been kept.

We don’t know why God waits to act. We don’t know why we still mourn in lonely exile here, almost 2000 years after Jesus said he was returning soon. What we do know is that God keeps his promises, and his plans are worth waiting for.

We don’t know when God will answer our prayers and come again. It may be tomorrow, it may be in a thousand years. But we know that God is coming, to lead us out of darkness into light, to end sin and death and sadness forever. Until then, we pray with the church throughout the world and throughout the centuries, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

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