

Promises Kept

Luke 2:22-40

Russian playwright Anton Chekov is considered one of the greatest writers in the world. Because of his fame, he was sought out for advice by younger playwrights. In one letter, he describes a principle now known as Chekov's gun. "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." If a gun is placed in a scene, it must at some point be used. Putting extraneous details in a story that are never mentioned or used again create false promises. Foreshadowing should lead to fulfillment.

Throughout the Christmas story, we see that God follows that principle. We see all sorts of details from Old Testament prophecies and events in the history of the people of Israel that foreshadow the coming of Jesus at Christmas. More than that, we see the characters, Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and others, who see the promises made to them fulfilled before their eyes. It's amazing how much fulfillment happens.

Promises kept.

What we see in the reading from Luke is that promises were kept even after what we think of as Christmas. God kept his promises to Simeon and Anna. Both of them had been waiting for Jesus for years, waiting for God to return to His temple. They'd been waiting for the birth of Jesus for years, and their waiting is finally over.

Mary and Joseph, despite the chaos of their lives, despite everything that had happened to them, keep their promises. They go to the temple to offer the sacrifices, to thank God for the gift of a son. They can only afford two turtledoves, which places them in the lower

classes, far from the wealth expected of parents of a king. Still, they are welcomed by two longtime dwellers of the temple, Simeon and Anna, and they leave with great blessing upon them.

God kept his promises in bringing Jesus into the world.

Simeon would hold Jesus in his arms and proclaim, "My eyes have seen your salvation," and Anna who had been "waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" would also give thanks to God for His provision in Jesus.

Simeon and Anna clearly recognize and speak over Jesus' great destiny. There is much praising and witnessing and blessing. What we do have present in this passage is great satisfaction. An emotion more powerful than happiness or excitement; we see several journeys come to completion, we see tasks finished, and we see destiny fulfilled. We see promises kept.

The satisfaction in this passage comes to Simeon when he is able to see the face of God in the face of a child. Simeon is able to pray with and be a blessing to God in human form, at a time when God is humble and in need of care. His life is made complete by being able to offer that service. The satisfaction comes to Anna when she realizes that the Jerusalem she loves will experience redemption. The community she had just about given up hope on, seeing it descend into chaos, will be restored. Her spirit is at peace. Mary and Joseph are satisfied by completing the actions their faith calls them to do. Their following of the demands of faith is where

peace lies. Indeed, all are satisfied, because of the promises kept.

Simeon and Anna displayed patience and hope as they waited for God's promises to be kept. But like many of the characters we encounter every year during the Christmas season, they don't wait long enough. They wait to see the Messiah born, they wait to see God return to the temple and to be among his people again, true. But they miss the rest of the story.

Simeon gets a glimpse of that when he warns Mary that "a sword will pierce through your own soul." With a blessing like that, we'd think that Simeon leaves in a little less than full peace. But he leaves the scene. Like Joseph and the wise men, the shepherds and the angels, Simeon and Anna point to Jesus as the Messiah, the one who they've been waiting for, but then fade away. After the first couple of chapters of Matthew and Luke, we don't hear from them or even about them again. They waited, they saw what they were promised, but there's so much of the story they miss. They miss Jesus traveling all throughout the countryside, teaching and healing. They miss all of the miracles that Jesus would do. They miss the parables Jesus would use to teach. They miss the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They miss Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. They miss Easter. They see the beginning of the story, but they don't wait around until the end. They miss that God will keep his promises to save his people, to save all people, from their sins.

Christmas is not just the fulfillment of what we were waiting for. It is the promise that our waiting is not in vain. It's the fulfillment that shows us that all of God's other promises are worth holding onto, worth trusting.

As we wait for Jesus to come again, we live in the same promises of Simeon and Anna. We have seen God's Word fulfilled among us, and trust that it will continue to be so. We trust that the same God who watched over Zechariah and Elizabeth in their years of waiting for a child, who watched Mary and Joseph as they watched the fulfillment of the promises made to them, who will continue to watch over us as we wait for the day when promises are fulfilled, when sin and sorrow no longer grow, when thorns no longer infest the ground, when snow and ice and cold and wind no longer harm us.

It's New Year's Eve, the end of 2023. Looking back at this year, how was this year? Was it full of joy or full of sorrow? One interesting exercise is to look back at your resolutions, your plans and dreams for the year. If you made resolutions at the beginning of 2023, how did you keep them? If you kept them, how did they change your life? If you didn't keep them, how long did you keep them going? What made you stop? It's interesting to look back at the promises you made, even just to yourself, and see how they were kept.

When we look at the promises God has made, we see that 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.

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