

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Scott Trevithick

Date: February 21, 2021 Year B, First Sunday in Lent

Text: Mark 1:9-15

Title: Promises, Promises

Focus: What's the implicit promise in this text? Not that you're always going to be happy or will not encounter hardship, but that God is present with us. Mark's references to Jesus' temptation and John's death are indicators that if even Jesus and his primary followers were not spared hard times/challenges/trials, neither will we be. Instead, God promises to be present with us no matter what we face.

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Effective Slogans

See if you know these company slogans. Or if you know the company associated with them. Some of the slogans have been around for a while, so if you know them that's an indication that they're effective.¹

- Whose slogan is "When you care enough to send the very best?" Hallmark
- With a name like *blank*, it has to be good - Smucker's
- What is "The Ultimate Driving Machine?" - BMW
- What is "The Quicker Picker Upper?" - Bounty paper towels
- Where is "The Happiest Place On Earth?" - Disneyland
- Who wants you to "Fly the friendly skies?" - United Airlines
- "Betcha can't eat just one!" - Eat one what? Lay's potato chips
- What is "The Breakfast of Champions?" - Wheaties
- "The Few, The Proud, The *blank*." The Marines - United States Marine Corps
- "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight" - FedEx

¹ 100 Effective Company Slogans for Inspiration in 2020. <https://www.b12.io/resource-center/content-creation/100-effective-company-slogans-for-inspiration-in-2020.html>

The Intended Impact of Slogans

A company slogan is a way to make a company stand out. It differentiates that business from others. It creates an association or an impression—it makes a potential customer feel something about that company and connects the public to who they are as a business or company--or at least how they want to portray themselves.

A slogan may also include a promise—a slogan may implicitly or explicitly promise you something about their product or how they operate or how they view you or treat you as a customer.

Sometimes promises are made even more directly. A business may promise

- “We will not be undersold! “Nobody beats our prices!”

Business management consultant and author Tom Peters, who wrote *In Search of Excellence*, which was the best-selling business book for over 20 years, poses a question/scenario about strategy:

- “With competition heating up in every market, firms are forced to promise the moon to get an order, especially that first order. Right?”²

What do you think? Is making a bold promise about what you can deliver—even if it’s an unrealistic one—is that the way to differentiate your company or attract business?

He responds to the scenario: (Excerpted from his article noted above)

- “Wrong. Reliability, rather than overly aggressive promises, is the most valuable strategic edge, especially for the mid- to long-haul. While getting faster at responding to customers is imperative, living up to commitments has never been worth more. Customers unfailingly prefer slightly less aggressive promises -- that are honored.”

In his article, he goes on to cite a number of examples that illustrate this point that *delivering* on promises is more important than overpromising and then underdelivering.

Promises, Promises.

We make promises in the Church, too, don’t you think?

I received a letter a while back from a person who had previously been active at Good Shepherd. He wanted to tell me why he had drifted away. His letter included a description of his disappointment. He wrote: “I remember being in the sanctuary and `singing, ‘*All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*’”

² TPG Communications, 1987. <https://tompeters.com/columns/under-promise-over-deliver/>

As he reflected on that song, he said that perhaps it was better thought of as *aspirational* rather than as a declaration of the way things really are.

He meant that perhaps we could or should see it as a prayer and an expression to which we aspire or intend to live, rather than concluding that's the way it already is in a self-congratulatory way.

I think he was disappointed because he saw that as a promise we made that wasn't kept, (at least not as he saw it).

There are others in the Church (capital "C" Church) who make promises.

Promises of Prosperity Gospel Preachers

- "Divine prosperity is God's will for every believer! All we must do to receive God's blessings and abundance is obey Him"³
- "You can begin your journey of divine prosperity today by sowing the seed God has put in your hand. God gives seed to the sower—not to the taker—and as you sow seed, you receive more seed. That is God's law of prosperity, an actual divine law that is activated only when we sow seed." (Hinn article)
- "I urge you today, as your brother in the Lord and one who has seen this law work, to sow seed in high expectation that your debt will come to an end, that you will no longer live from paycheck to paycheck, and that abundance will be your inheritance, passed down to your children and your children's children. Once debt is out of your life, you will leave an inheritance and be a blessing to the work of the Lord." (Hinn article)

There is a part of the Christian church—or at least a part of the American Christian Church—in which you hear preachers make these kinds of promises. (These promises I just voiced, by the way, are taken directly from the writings of some of these prosperity preachers.) Many are very successful at delivering this message—if "success" is measured by that preacher's own personal wealth, lavish lifestyle, and number of followers.

The promise, most succinctly put, is that "God rewards the faithful with health and wealth within the course of their human life if they have the right kind of faith."⁴ The promise is associated with the prosperity gospel, which is a movement that grew out of Pentecostalism. (Kate Bowler, as noted above.)

There's some degree of appeal for all of us in those promises, isn't there?

- We all would rather not have to admit that suffering exists or that evil exists.

³ "God's Promises of Prosperity for You," posted at Benny Hinn Ministries. <https://www.bennyhinn.org/gods-promises-of-prosperity-for-you/>

⁴ Researcher and Duke Divinity professor Kate Bowler in *Fresh Air* conversation on NPR with Terry Gross. February 12, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/12/585066841/a-stage-4-cancer-patient-shares-the-pain-and-clarity-of-living-scan-to-scan>. See also Kate Bowler's NY Times essay: "Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me," Feb. 13, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/death-the-prosperity-gospel-and-me.html>

- We're uncomfortable with the whole idea of suffering and so we deal with that discomfort by trying to explain it away.
- There is a lure to the promise of health and wealth.

So, this promise is seductive; it's appealing.

Today's Gospel Text

This gospel text for today challenges the assumptions of the prosperity preachers. It presents a story which challenges the notion that good little Christians always get what they want. The passage has 3 movements or episodes:

1. First there is the baptism of Jesus (vv. 9-11), a portion we have recently read and on which we focused in worship on Jan. 10 with the Baptism of Jesus.
2. In the second movement
 - Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit.
 - Jesus is in the wilderness 40 days and is tested or tempted by Satan.
 - Jesus is waited on, or ministered to, or served by angels during this time.
 - This is the Greek verb *diakoneó* (dee-ak-on-eh'-o) that we talked about 2 weeks ago in the story of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law and her serving them.)
3. There's this brief aside that opens the third episode: **¹⁴Now after John was arrested. . .**
 - a. This reference to John is so brief it might be missed.
 - b. However brief, it refers to John being arrested by Herod Antipas, an action which ultimately resulted in his death.
 - c. This episode continues as Jesus proclaims the good news of God in Galilee that the kingdom of God has come near . . . (vv. 14-15)

If you're operating from the set of assumptions that we've talked about—that we are at the center of the relationship with God and that God is just waiting for you to name and claim the blessing that you want, then grappling with this passage would be sobering. . . This passage punctures the helium balloon of optimism or the sparkly illusion of those who are seduced by the promises of the prosperity gospel preachers.

What promises are in this passage?

The passage is a stark and, ultimately, hopeful and helpful reminder that Christian faith is not a panacea; it's not an answer to all of our questions and problems, and it's certainly not an invitation to the easy life.⁵

One thing I heard Pastor Carl say last week in his sermon that resonated with me was, "The Bible is not a rulebook, but is about continuing to be in relationship." (His Transfiguration Sunday sermon on February 14.)

⁵ *Panacea*: Meaning all-curing or all-healing from Greek *πανάκεια* (*panákeia*), derived from *pan*, "all" and *akos*, from the verb for to cure or heal.

I see Carl's comment as helpful to us in understanding this passage as a counter to assumptions like the prosperity preachers I cited earlier, who claim that "That is God's law of prosperity, an actual divine law that is activated only when we sow seed" (Hinn article noted earlier).

That kind of expression—that prosperity is "a law" creates this expectation that "If you do this, then God will do this" and that you get what you deserve. As Carl said, the Bible is not a rulebook, but about living in relationship with God.

In this passage we're confronted with temptation or testing or hard times that Jesus himself experienced. Then we have a reference to the arrest of John, which is for us also an allusion to John's death. Jesus' temptation and John's death are indicators that if even Jesus and his primary followers were not spared hard times or challenges or times of testing, then neither will we be.

- **So, what is the promise that this text makes, implicitly or explicitly?**

That's a question I posed to folks in our Tuesday Bible study class, asking them to identify what they saw as the claim of the text or the promise imbedded in it. Here's what they said:

- John: "Life is not easy."
- Linda: "God is near."
- Deanna: "You're never alone."
- Mary-Claire: "Hope—I see hope in this passage."

I think they're right on track. As seen especially in God's presence with Jesus in the wilderness, expressed most especially through the angels who served or ministered to him, I think the promise made in the text is not that we will always escape hardship, but that God is present with us no matter what we face.

This is an affirmation that you'll see in other parts of today's liturgy as well:

Call to Confession and Prayer of Confession:

- "Again and again, God meets us where we are. . ."
- "We remember together that we are not alone."
- "[God was] with Jesus at his baptism, with him in the wilderness, and even in between, [God was] right there, saying aloud, 'This is my beloved.'"
- Spoken as a prayer, "We know that you are with us too—in the good, the bad, and everything in between."

Affirmation of Faith:

- "We believe in a God who is everywhere and right here. We believe that God meets us where we are."

Lots of people and lots of companies make promises. May we trust and believe in the promise imbedded in this passage that God is with us no matter what we face. Thanks be to God. Amen.