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 Isaiah 7, 9; Jeremiah 33
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THE GREATEST PROMISE

Advent is the season when we proclaim the birth of Jesus. We never cease to marvel at the fact that God became man. Here is how John Donne put it,

Tw'as much that man was made like God before,
 But that God should be made like man, much more.

One writer captures the essence of this season:

We do get another chance! The Season of Advent gives the church the opportunity to begin again. Once more the full story of God's grace is awaiting our discovery. Once more we shake off the failures and victories of the past, and we get a clean page on which to write the story of our companionship with God in Christ. Once more we get to listen and respond in faithfulness to the God who comes to us so humbly, intimately, and personally in the birth of Jesus. Advent marks the beginning of the church year and lays before us the pathway of faith for the year ahead. Advent initiates once again remembering, retelling, and celebrating the whole drama of God's revelation.¹

During Advent we remember and retell the drama of God's revelation. And we have many themes from which to choose: God coming in humility and obscurity; God laying aside his power, might and glory; God becoming a child-king; God coming near to us to love us; the story of two teenagers and their response to a quite unexpected pregnancy, and receiving the greatest gift the world has known. But the theme I would like to consider this morning centers on the thought that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of a preposterous, incredible, unimaginable promise that God himself had made and reiterated to his people over hundreds of years.

In the beginning, God created man and woman in his image. He placed them in a garden and provided for their every need. But things went wrong in a hurry. It seems mankind always wants something other than the gifts of God. We want to live outside of God's will. But right there, in the beginning, when God's dreams took a tumble, when he might well have given up on the whole project, he said that he would do something about the situation. So God made a promise. There was coming a seed who would do battle with the enemy that had thwarted Adam and Eve. This seed would bring about a total victory, but at great cost. Adam named his wife Eve, the mother of all living. And so the drama began. Who would this seed be? When would he come, and how would he bring salvation?

The promise then came to Abraham: he would be the father of a great nation and a blessing to all the families of the earth. God promised him a son, an impossible task since Abraham and Sarah were unable to conceive and their bodies were old. That was a trying time for Abraham and Sarah. They kept trying to figure out how God would fulfill his promise. They decided to help out, so they involved their servant in an impulsively hatched scheme. But still God did not give up on his promise. He did what he said he would do:

Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. (Gen 21:1-3)

This pattern of miraculous births continued with Abraham's family: Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. It became the norm that God acted, based on his promise to bring children into the world miraculously.

As the drama continued to unfold, God multiplied Jacob's family into a nation. God birthed this nation through water as he delivered them from bondage in Egypt. He gave them instructions on how to live wisely in a relationship with him. He gave them a land, a new garden, a place where they could meet with him—everything they had ever wanted.

Birth narratives continue to appear in the story, even when Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and the shepherds and priests went astray. Manoah and his wife had a son named Samson, a deliverer. Hannah cried out to the Lord in her barrenness, and then gave birth to Samuel, the first prophet. The people wanted a king so they could be like all the other nations. Unwisely, they choose Saul. But God gave his people another king, an unlikely choice, since he was the least of his brothers. David ascended to the throne and God's people experienced an amazing time of prosperity.

But no matter what God did, his people had a hard time believing, following and obeying him. They wanted to be like everyone else and worship their idols. How stupid! We would never dream of doing anything like that, would we? Just when things became really bleak, God spoke to his people through the prophets, pleading with them to return to him rather than face his judgment. Even when his people lost everything and went into exile, he continued to promise them salvation and restoration. In the darkest hours, God's promises actually became more and more clear and descriptive of what really happened when Jesus was born. And so we read in Micah:

**"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
 Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
 From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
 His goings forth are from long ago,
 From the days of eternity." (Mic 5:2)**

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. And yet his goings forth were from the days of eternity. "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1).

Isaiah prophesied:

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." (Isa 7:14)

In his gospel, Luke begins with yet another account of a barren woman. This time it was Elizabeth who miraculously conceived and gave birth to John. But the pattern suddenly was altered. The angel Gabriel announced to Elizabeth's relative, Mary, a virgin, that she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. Retelling the story, we see that Jesus is the greatest miracle baby: he is both human and beyond human. Matthew quotes Isaiah's text to show that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah was fulfilled. Jesus was Immanuel, God with us.

Isaiah also proclaimed:

**The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them. (Isa 9:2)**

The apostle John incorporates this theme in these words, "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:4-5).

Isaiah added:

**For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty
God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. (Isa 9:6)**

This remarkable child would be the Prince of Peace. Luke records appropriately:

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." (Luke 2:13-14)

While we are familiar with the texts from Micah and Isaiah, there is another text that perhaps is not so familiar, a remarkable word in Jeremiah proclaiming a day when a greater son of David would arise and sit on David's throne:

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: the LORD is our righteousness." For thus says the LORD, "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to prepare sacrifices continually." (Jer 33:14-18)

Despite all the hard things which God had said through Jeremiah, there was still the promise that God would fulfill his word. A king was coming and he would do what all kings are supposed to do, which is practice justice and righteousness. This king would bring salvation and security. The city that had been destroyed by Babylon would be healed and given a new name, "The LORD is our righteousness." The future of both David's dynasty and the priestly order were guaranteed.

God then signed his name, guaranteeing the reliability of his promise:

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, 'If you can break My covenant for the day and My covenant for the night, so that day and night will not be at their appointed time, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant so that he will not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levitical priests, My ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be counted and the sand of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me.'" (Jer 33:19-22)

God's reliability is based on both his work in creation and his word to Abraham. God created night and day. No one can alter this covenant, not even our highly sophisticated and technological society. It is preposterous to think that one could change the movements of the sun and the moon. God's word would not change. Secondly, God alluded to the promise he gave to Abraham and Jacob regarding a heritage, a seed that compared in magnitude to the stars in the heavens and the sand of the seashore (Gen 15:5; 22:17; 32:12). God confirmed the continuity of his people, David's dynasty, and true worship.

The promise in Jeremiah was reaffirmed by the angel Gabriel to Mary:

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." (Luke 1:32-33)

Walter Bruggemann comments: "God will keep God's word, not only for night and day, but for king and priest about which God has also made promises. Historical structures rooted in God's promises are as sure as cosmic sequences authored by God who creates and presides. God's love to Israel is as sure as God's ordering of creation."²

The birth of Jesus was the undeniable fulfillment of God's promise to bring salvation to his people, to install a righteous king on the throne of David forever and restore the priesthood of Melchizedek. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14a). God was faithful to his promise.

Jesus is the gift we embrace and receive during the Christmas season. But, what about the one who gave the gift? Let us reflect on this truth that God has kept his promise, which he fulfilled in the birth of his Son.

1. Advent reminds us that God is committed to his people

No matter how ugly and dark the world has become or will become, no matter how unfaithful God's people, God will be faithful to his word. He is committed to us and will not renege on his promise.

As I look at my life, my weaknesses, my failures, my faithlessness, my selfishness, it's hard to grasp the fact that God hasn't given up on me. I would have given up on me, but somehow he keeps hanging in there. He keeps nudging, poking, prodding, forgiving, encouraging. It is difficult for us to grasp this truth because we are so used to writing people off. But that isn't the case with our God who sent his Son to be with us.

Certainly this truth humbles us; there is no place for pride. But neither is there any place for self-pity. We can't say that we are alone, that nobody is for us, that everyone has given up on us, because God hasn't. We can rest content in God's word and promise.

He has worked in the past and will continue to work in the future. He will complete what he began.

And it's not that he is committed to just you and me individually. He is committed to us corporately. He is committed to his people. He is committed to his church. This is why Jesus was born: to restore God's people to himself. Nothing that mankind does can thwart this plan. No matter how governments and organizations try to eradicate God's name from every public display, and prohibit his name from being spoken in every public arena, people are going to be saved and the Church is going to grow. As we gather every week to worship we do so with a great sense of purpose. We gather as God's people, not as a group of individuals.

2. Advent reminds us that the Lord is our righteousness

This is the word of Jeremiah. There is a new city with a new name: the Lord is our righteousness. The birth of Jesus declares that this salvation we have in Jesus is totally and completely the work of God. Righteousness comes to us from heaven.

This is the significance of the virgin birth. Righteousness can't come from man, because mankind is tainted and stained by sin. A human birth, even life conceived in a barren womb, would not suffice. We cannot have the righteousness of God unless God becomes our righteousness. And we are dependent on that if we are to live in a right and whole relationship with him.

According to Frederick Buechner, the birth of Jesus is "no ordinary birth but a virgin birth because the birth of righteousness and love in this stern world is always a virgin birth. It is never men nor the nations of men nor all the power and wisdom of men that bring it forth but always God, and that is why the angel says, 'The child to be born will be called the Son of God.'"³

This is why Christmas inspires such awe and wonder, why my eyes well up with tears every year when I watch the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. God has entered into human history. He has gifted us with something we could not attain. Even the world is drawn into the idea of grace, of giving and loving during this season.

3. Advent reminds us that nothing is impossible with God

This is the very thing that the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary when she questioned him regarding the plausibility of having a child, since she was a virgin: "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). The Greek text states, "every word will not be impossible." In other words, nothing that God says or promises will remain unfulfilled, no matter how farfetched or implausible it might seem to us.

Wendell Berry suggests that this is the whole sum of our faith:

"With God all things are possible"—
that's the beginning and the end
of theology. If all things are possible,
nothing is impossible.⁴

When we think about a baby born to a virgin, we have to ask, How did God do this? The answer of course is that it is a mystery beyond our human understanding. But then this is what God does — the impossible, the improbable and the ridiculous.

Are you having a difficult time trying to understand how God is going to fulfill his promises to you? How can God save you from the power of an addiction in your life? How can God restore a damaged relationship? How can God change your heart that is filled with so much anger and resentment and guilt? How can God make up for the years that the locusts have eaten? Come to Bethlehem along with

the shepherds and the wise men. Gaze upon the manger where the infant child lies and be reminded that nothing is impossible when God is at work. He is always working to bring healing and wholeness, restoration and salvation.

About two and a half years ago, my son met a young Romanian girl who had come to the Bay Area for several months. When Johnny and Moni began to spend time with each other, I thought to myself, this is impossible. Over the next couple of years, as I watched this relationship ebb and flow, I thought to myself, this is impossible. This goes against everything I teach our singles group about relationships. Earlier this year my son went to Romania for two and a half months to spend time with Moni. She applied for a work visa to come here, but her request was denied. This is impossible. Well, in October we went to Romania for a wedding, a legal wedding so that Moni could apply for a visa. We anticipated that it would take at least six months. We feared she might even be denied since she had already been denied previously. Moni arrived just before Thanksgiving. This is impossible. The last phase will be a church wedding. Last week, Moni announced that she and my wife had already bought a wedding dress. When my wife goes shopping, nothing is impossible!

What stops us from stepping out in faith, risking beyond our natural ability, going beyond what we can see with our eyes? I'm not talking about getting married, but about loving someone you don't want to love, reaching out to a neighbor and sharing the gospel, going on that missions trip even though you don't know the language. Advent tells us that nothing is impossible with God.

4. Advent reminds us that God's promises are never fulfilled without anticipation and longing

Isn't this true of life? The best gifts most often come following painstaking periods of waiting. Retelling the story of Christ's coming reminds us that God kept promising and waiting, promising and waiting. It wasn't until the fullness of the time had arrived that God sent forth his Son. We see this anticipation in the words of the psalmist:

Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel,
You who lead Joseph like a flock;
You who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth!
Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up Your power
And come to save us!
O God, restore us
And cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.
O LORD God of hosts,
How long will You be angry with the prayer of Your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
And You have made them to drink tears in large measure.
You make us an object of contention to our neighbors,
And our enemies laugh among themselves.
O God of hosts, restore us
And cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved. (Ps
80:1-7)

The promises of God do not mean that life will be easy. At times we will cry tears in large measure. We will face rejection and ridicule. We will grow discouraged and lose heart. At times we think that God is angry with us, that he doesn't hear our prayers, that we have to do something for him to smile at us. But no. Sometimes we want something so much our heart breaks. This doesn't mean that God is not there or that he doesn't care. Sometimes we try and rush the

process, like Abraham and Sarah. But we can never rush God. When we try to, we usually make matters more complicated. God is always waiting for just the right time. And as we wait, the anticipation increases our longing for him. Waiting increases our capacity for joy and deepens our trust in him who is faithful.

5. Advent reminds us that we can have hope for today and tomorrow

The fact that God kept his promise gives us a great sense of assurance. It's quite remarkable that many of God's promises appear in the prophets. This was a time of darkness for God's people. The land had been overrun by Israel's enemies; the things they gave their lives to had been shattered. They were forced into exile, to live a life they didn't want to live, in a place they didn't want to be. But to grant hope to his people even during the most painful times, God gave them the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and others. A child would be born, light would dawn, a king would appear.

Our hope is based on the promises of God, not on the things of this world. We place our hope in things we do not see. And even when the storms of life assail and assault us, when we are overwhelmed with darkness, when we are living a life we don't want to live, even when we suffer the consequences of our sin, we can have hope in God because he has kept his word in the past. God promised salvation, God promised a Savior, and God sent his Son. We can live in the present, confident, trusting, believing that God knows us and cares for us. He is present with us and he loves us.

And not only do we have hope for the present, we have hope for the future. Advent reminds us not just of the first, but of the second coming. Jeremiah announced, "Behold, days are coming," and that day came. However, there will be yet a greater day and a greater fulfillment of God's promises. We live in the age of the Spirit. We have a foretaste of what lies ahead, and yet we know that there is something much greater coming. The King will come in glory. We will see the greater son of David on his throne. No longer will there be sadness or pain or tears or sin or death. God has made a promise and he will fulfill his word.

During this Advent season, as we reflect on the birth of Jesus, God's commitment to us, our hope and our righteousness in him, let us live with hopeful anticipation for the glorious day when he will come again.

1. Rueben Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), 20.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 320.
3. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, quoted in Job and Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer*, 26-27.
4. Wendell Berry, *Given* (Emeryville: Shoemaker Hoard, 2005), 10.

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