

“The Promise of Christmas”

Luke 1: 26-33 & Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Dr. Richard J. Alberta

Sunday December 3, 2017

Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Brighton, Michigan 48114

Text: Luke 1:26-38 (NIV) ²⁶ In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." ³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

The title today is **“The Promise of Christmas.”** God has made several amazing Promises thru the centuries to those who love Him and who belong to Him at least by title. Here is what I mean by that. The people of Abraham, the literal Jews who do not accept and who do not know their Messiah Jesus...are still in a sense a people who belong to God. In the sense that they are the descendants of Abraham and God is still blessing them. Not with eternal life but with fulfilled Promises to some extent here on Planet Earth.

The Angel Gabriel made a Promise to Mary that was the most extraordinary thing that a human being has ever heard. He said to this young woman: **“You will be with child...that child will be the Son of the Most High...and his kingdom will never end.”** Not exactly your everyday conversation with an angel! Then he made several related Promises about the Holy Spirit and about Mary’s relative Elizabeth...that she would also have a child in her old age. Then the Angel reminds her not to be very shocked because with God all things are possible. Indeed, she was the first to hear of the great Promise of Christmas...the Promise of Christ... the Promise that fills our hearts once we truly have invited Jesus to live within us. No imagined or poetic presence but a real indwelling of the Son of God thru the Holy Spirit within

us. For the genuine born-again Christian, the Promise of Christmas is not just about December 25, but it is experienced everyday day in our lives! Let's consider that Promise on this first day of Advent. But before doing so, let us pray.

Last Friday was November 29. That was the date, seventy years ago, of a Promise fulfilled for the Jews. It went largely unnoticed in the current news that is filled with new reports of sexual predation and madmen dictators shooting off missiles. But it was and is actually bigger news than any of those things. It was the day a Promise was fulfilled. November 27, 1947. A Promise that goes back many centuries. The Jews, literal Israel, had turned away from following the Lord. They had become idolaters like the pagan nations around them. God had warned them in Leviticus, in 1300 BC, that He would punish them. We read:

Leviticus 26:33 (NIV) I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins.

That is exactly what happened. The Jews subsequently suffered under the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Romans and just about everyone else. They were scattered throughout the world for centuries. But God had made another Promise to them. It came later in Deuteronomy. It was a merciful Promise and it read this way:

Deuteronomy 30:4-5 (NIV) ⁴ Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. ⁵ He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.

But how long would it be before that Promise was fulfilled? Over three thousand years! It was literally fulfilled on November 29, 1947 when the United Nations voted to establish two separate homelands in Palestine, one for the Jews and one for the Arabs. Ever since the two have been at war but the vote of the U.N. was literally the fulfillment of a Promise made by God to the fleshly descendants of Abraham. Not because they deserved it and not because they loved God and not because they had turned back to God. But because God keeps His Promises.

But far greater than that, God made a Promise to create a new Israel comprised of Jews and Gentiles who would be called the people of Christ...Christians. And that Promise has everything to do with our video this morning of shepherds and sheep. Because another event happened just about a year before the United Nations vote. A far greater Promise was discovered in a miraculous way. I'll tell you about it...in a little while.

This greater Promise was written out by the Prophet Jeremiah and it tells us about Christmas... the coming of Christ. It does not use that word, but it highlights what God will be doing in establishing a "True Israel" in the days to come. Written 700 years before Jesus was born, the Holy Spirit put these words into the mouth of the great prophet:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NIV) ³¹ "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

God said this new covenant would not be like the previous one that was filled with written laws and regulations. Rules that they would not and could not keep. No. It would be a new covenant that would be downloaded into the hearts and minds of God's people. It would be a new covenant that would allow each believer to know God and His ways. A new covenant that would provide the people of God with His ongoing presence. All of them from the least to the greatest. That was the Christmas Promise as given thru Jeremiah. Thus, we see its fulfillment in the visit of the angel to the young woman Mary. Notice the Promise elaborated by the angel:

³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

The Promise of Christmas was first made thru the prophets but next it was made to Mary. It was a Promise that God Himself would live among them thru His Son. That son would sit upon a throne as the King and he would reign. He would reign forever! And the Jews of the first century were clinging to that Promise. They were waiting for their King. They were watching for their King. And they had every reason to expect their King to look and act like a King! And then came Jesus of Nazareth. And they were disappointed! They said, "This cannot be the fulfillment of the Promised Messiah!"

They were expecting a long line of limos and police motorcycles and flashing lights and they were expecting their Promised king to step out and walk into a great tower with hundreds of fawning and adoring people weeping at the sight of him... and with intimidating special forces all around him... and what did they get? A fifteen or sixteen-year-old virgin girl from a very modest family telling her parents that God's angel had visited her and that the Holy Spirit would place the Christ child in her womb and she would be his earthly mother! That sounded really disappointing.

Who among us has not been disappointed in a life promise? A ball player is drafted who will take your team to the Super Bowl, but he washes out in his first season. A marriage that promises to be non-stop bliss and joy and it fails in the second year. A "can't miss" stock market tip that costs you almost everything. Life is filled with broken promises and Jesus of Nazareth also was looked upon by the community of Jews as a real bust. Jesus was born as the sinless Son of God and the people shouted, "We want our money back! He's a loser! This can't be the fulfilled Promise!" Did I make that up for the sake of drama? No... consider this passage from John. Jesus knew that he was the living Christmas Promise and the time had come to begin to reveal himself... carefully... like unwrapping a beautiful gift from under the tree very gently... in an unhurried way... so we read:

John 1:43-46 (NIV) ⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

And he did it. Why? Why did this man Philip drop everything and follow Jesus? Why had the others done so as well? What Divine magic overcame them? What had they heard and seen? This was totally illogical. Jesus had no troops and no limousine and no title and no credentials and no palace! But like someone opening a totally unexpected Christmas gift, Philip is stunned and thrilled, and he follows Jesus. Maybe his friends Andrew and Peter had told him about Jesus. We read:

⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

Philip is convinced. Philip is certain that he has seen the promise fulfilled. He is so excited, he can't wait to find his friend Nathaniel and tell him about it. We read:

⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

Nathaniel just said "Are you kidding? Nazareth? That backwater town with absolutely no charm? Are you telling me that the Promised Messiah has come from inner city Detroit with

its burned-out buildings or Flint with its rampant crime or Chicago where a dozen people are brutally murdered every weekend? Come on Philip! The Promised Messiah will be known by his grace and bearing, and his troops and horses and he will look the part!" What would Philip say? What does anyone say when they share their experience with Christ with an unbeliever? If they are smart they simply say, "You will need to experience him for yourself." So, we read his response:

"Come and see," said Philip.

Great response. Philip needed to see and experience the living Christmas Promise for himself and it didn't take much to convince Philip. We read:

John 1:47-51 (NIV) ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." ⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." ⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." ⁵¹

Philip came to faith in Christ because he had apparently been a long way off when Jesus picked him out...and told him all about himself. Jesus then makes the great Christmas Promise to Philip...that he would see greater things than that! Jesus tells Philip and all who were listening that they would see him for who he is: the Promise of Christmas fulfilled. And...it was an old promise.

Yes, seventy years ago last Wednesday God fulfilled His Promise to re-gather the children of Abraham to their ancestral land in Israel. But about a year before that, an even more amazing thing happened. Shepherd boys on the hillside in Palestine. They were Bedouin teenagers. A word that just means "desert-dweller." Probably bored in the sand and heat watching their flocks as assigned by their fathers. There were Muhammed and Juma and Khalib tossing stones fifty yards into the opening of a cave. Playing a kid's game to pass the time when they heard the sound of breaking pottery after one of their throws. They looked at each other and then went to the cave to explore. There they found several ceramic jars...they were very old and one of them now shattered. In this jar and many others would be what the world came to know as the "Dead Sea Scrolls!" Written documents well preserved from twenty-five hundred years ago including the entire message of the Prophet Isaiah. And it matched virtually perfectly with the manuscripts we have today and the translation that is in your Bible.

Eventually, the documents were examined and studied and sold and re-sold. Throughout the process, many scholars noted a simple passage that was actually the Promise of Christmas made nearly eight centuries earlier. It says:

Isaiah 7:14 (NIV) Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

A slip of paper perhaps the size of a modern envelope. A portion of Isaiah's prophecy. A Promise of Christmas that an unmarried virginal young woman would bear a child who would be God among us... the meaning of "Immanuel." We must marvel at the unhurried ways of God! Twenty-seven centuries ago God spoke thru the Prophet Isaiah. The Jewish community at Quorum on the west bank in Israel made copies and hid them in a ceramic vase in an unnoticed cave... perhaps to keep them safe from raiding parties.

There the Christmas Promise sat hidden...in writing at until seventy years ago until some kids started scaling rocks and the ceramic vase was broken... sort of like that event found in John Chapter Twelve when a woman broke a jar of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus... and the whole house was filled with the fragrance ...and not long after that Jesus... the Promise of Christmas... Jesus... invited them to a meal with him... a Passover meal... what we call "The Lord's Supper" at which we remember the Promise to come... that there will be a great feast with Jesus and all of us who belong to him.

What a marvel is the Word of God ... filled with Christmas Promises. Let us pray.

