

The Breadth of God's Promises

Luke 8: 9-14

Joel 2: 23-32

Oct 23, 2022

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Luke 8: 9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Joel 2: 23-32

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

--

A prayer for mercy will bring extravagant forgiveness. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, you shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Even in our two brief Scripture passages this morning we hear so many promises from God—promises that are life-giving, wide-ranging, hope offering, inspiring and generous—as God's countless promises surely have abundant depth and breadth.

Out of curiosity as I was thinking about the idea of the breadth of God's promises I did a little internet search to see just how many promises God has given to us ---and there are over 8000ⁱ of them in the bible! In over 8000 ways God promises to protect us, to give us health and healing, to redeem us, to bless us with relief from anxiety and burdens, to offer us presence, hope, abundant life and comfort and to hear and answer our prayers....and that is just the beginning.

Now of course to really explore these 8000 promises would actually be quite a lengthy and complicated task. Which translation and language of the bible is being used? What was the original context? Was this a promise to one specific person in one particular situation or a promise made to everyone for all time? Was this a promise made more than once but seemed to be another promise?

The point, the bottom line, is not about a messy inventory but the recognition, the knowledge, the conviction, of the depth and breadth of God's promises to us because promises, God's promises, matter. They mattered to our faith ancestors and they matter to us. God's promises give us hope, reassurance, restoration, redemption and comfort. We follow Paul's guidance to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithfulⁱⁱ, and we sing with the joy of the psalmistⁱⁱⁱ, 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!'

Promises *made to us* by others may or may not always be kept—intentionally or unintentionally. Promises *we make* to others may or may not always be kept—intentionally or unintentionally. But God's promises are made and are kept, even when we do not see that as the timing or the substance is not exactly what we wanted it to be, and sometimes those promises of depth and breadth are far more enriching, healing, forgiving and merciful than we could have ever imagined.

We see the breadth of God's promises through the water and the Spirit of baptism as we are embraced and brought into the body of Christ, brought into all the promises of the gospel by the outward and visible sign of the grace of God. God in Christ pours out upon us promise upon promise in the waters of baptism, sealing us into love and grace divine. God's promises are wide and broad as one local church speaks for the whole church with promises to love, support, and care for the newly baptized throughout their whole life.

We see the breadth of God's promises when God offers absurdly generous forgiveness. The tax collector was humbled as he sought forgiveness, not even daring to look heavenward as he prayed, as he begged, for God's mercy. And that's all that he did—ask for mercy—he did not repent of his dishonest, corrupt and greedy ways—he just asked to be forgiven and Jesus tells us that he was. The Pharisee who seems to live a faithful life of good behavior, of generous stewardship and spiritual practices, is not forgiven as quickly as he must first learn humility, first learn humble contrition, as his arrogance and contempt were as poison to his life of faithful service. God fulfills the promises of forgiveness to us even as we must also learn lessons along the way. In the breadth of God's promises are mercy, grace and forgiveness that remind us to serve and to love everyone with grace and humility. We know, we experience, the breadth of God's promise of absurdly generous forgiveness and mercy over and over in our lives, mindful that the God who created us can also recreate us.

We rejoice to see the breadth of God's promises when God offers radical abundance, plenty and satisfaction after times of trouble, of loss, of devastation. God's loving kindness is available for all in ways we often cannot anticipate, can understand, and sometimes even dream.

Through the traumatic natural disaster of the locust plague and the economic calamity that followed from it, Joel prophesied and shared a vision of a better world beyond the devastation. The world Joel sees as God promises it is one in which rain falls as it should, harvests are plentiful, human and animal bellies are full and God's spirit pours out on all people after a natural disaster. Prosperity and plenty are coming, satisfaction will replace scarcity and shame, yet this is not a passive coming, a just sit back and wait. Working, waiting, living into God's promises can include dreams and visions, plans and hopes, and all are included—young and old, male and female, free and servant, rich or poor.

Centuries later Peter holds up Joel's prophesy, God's wide promises, as the Pentecost Spirit birthed the Church, and celebrates that the longed for changes are coming, the promised abundance that is on the way. God is and will be abiding in the midst of God's people.

In our own time in which we so often hear of scarcity, limits, insecurity, devastation, we know God's promises are of gracious and generous abundance as we envision and act upon dismantling the barriers that damage and destroy just as much as the locusts did--the barriers of fear, of greed, of superiority, as the breadth of God's promises are poured out for all people. This is not the fantasy and handout some now expect with a prosperity gospel—that God will bestow wealth upon believers—but one of abundance, love, grace, peace, hope, welcome and redemption for all as we live in faith and promises.

As South African poet and philosopher Gift Gugu Mona^{iv} reminds us, “Faith is a golden way of holding on to the promises of God.” Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.honeyletstalk.com/gods-promises/>

ⁱⁱ Hebrews 10:23

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 119: 103

^{iv} Gift Gugu Mona, *The Essence of Faith: Daily Inspirational Quotes*