

“Promises, Promises”

Romans 8:26-39

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There are many wonderful promises in scripture, God’s promises to God’s people that enable us to know God’s character and how God intends to be in relationship with us. One of God’s promises is to always be with us through the good, the bad and the ugly. Jesus echoed God’s promise as he said to his disciples “remember, I am with you always.” before returning to heaven. Rather than promise our lives will be easy God promises to remain with us no matter how easy or difficult they become. God also promises to give us the strength to endure but more than just endure, the strength to be a conqueror over things which threaten to defeat us.

I visited with an elderly member this week who has endured the loss of her spouse, her home of many years, much of her independence and health. “How do people make it without faith,” she asked. That question is actually more a statement than a question. I consider such statements to be a personal statement of faith as well as a declaration of God’s faithfulness in a person’s life. I have heard so many of you make similar statements. God promises to always be with us and to help us through difficult times. And God does. . . .within our own congregation, one sees God helping members cope with the loss of loved ones, employment, mobility and independence, helping members dealing with chronic illness--their own or a family member’s, I see God helping parents parent their children and helping children grow in faith. God will always help us, always be with us. That is God’s promise.

God also promises to work for good, to bring about good out of difficult situations. It should come as no surprise that the very God who sent The Son to redeem the world continues redeeming the circumstances and situations we live in. No matter what difficulty we face, we can trust God is at work in the situation bringing good out of it, redeeming it in some way.

While working as a hospital chaplain, I got to know a psychotherapist assigned to the psychiatric ward for teenagers. He led group and individual

therapy sessions with teenagers admitted with a variety of mental illnesses and disorders. One day, I asked him, "What led you to do this type of work?" and he began telling me his life story. "My mom and dad divorced when I was in grade school and I lived with my mother. When I was in middle school, I noticed a change in my mother. Some days she seemed fine while other days she could not concentrate long enough to finish cooking dinner. She once woke me in the middle of the night asking if I heard anything. She seemed scared. We sat on my bed while she repeatedly asked, "don't you hear that? Don't you hear what she is saying?" Our breathing was all I heard. I was only in middle school but realized my mother was ill and needed help. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia soon after and hospitalized multiple times. I remember being frightened knowing my mother could get ill again at any time. In college, I realized I wanted to work with people dealing with mental illness. I wanted to help them and their families so they would not have to live in fear like I had." That is one way God works for good, brings good out of a difficult situation.

The first Thanksgiving my children were going to be with their father for the day my cousins invited me over to their house. Even though I was to be at my sister's earlier in the day they insisted I come later that afternoon so I would not be home alone. They served up heaping dishes of love and gentle conversation along with the food. On Father's Day, they started the tradition of including me in the celebrations with their own fathers knowing once again, my children would be gone for the day. Their compassion made many a difficult day easier to bear and brought healing to my life. Their compassion is one way God redeemed a painful situation. God works with us and through us to accomplish God's good work.

Another promise God makes is to always love us no matter what we have done or not done. If you steal, cheat, kill or commit adultery—God loves you. Even if you slander others, slander God, covet what others have—God loves you. If you have placed a higher priority on career success, accumulation of wealth, on people or things in your life, i.e. making them your god (little g) Almighty God, (big G), continues to love you. If God calls you to do or be something and you respond with a resounding "NO" –God loves you. It makes no difference what sin or distance stands between us, God loves us still. No matter how we live and move and have our being God will always, always, always, forever and ever amen love us. It is hard to fathom, is it not? The love we share with

spouses, friends, parents, siblings, children experiences ebb and flow while God's love remains constant. It is hard to believe, is it not? How does one respond to such unconditional love? With gratitude our whole life long? As much as God prefers that response, God will love us no matter how we respond. Difficult to believe, isn't it?

Tony Campolo shares the story of a friend who is pastor of a church in Brooklyn, in a run down, beat up area of the city. The pastor received a call one day from the local funeral director who said that he had a funeral nobody wanted to officiate. None of the ministers in the area wanted anything to do with this funeral. The man had died of AIDS. Tony's friend, Jim, took the funeral. He later asked his friend what the funeral had been like.

He said, "When I got there, there were about 30 homosexual men. They never looked up at me. Their heads were down and they stared at the floor the whole time I spoke. After the funeral service was over we got into the waiting automobiles and went out to the cemetery. I stood on one side of the grave with the funeral director and the homosexual men stood on the other side. They were frozen in place like statues. They seemed to be motionless. Not a nerve or sinew moved as I read Scripture and prayed. We lowered the body into the grave and I pronounced the benediction. I turned to leave and then I realized none of them were moving. I turned back and I asked, 'Is there anything more I can do?'"

One of the men said, "Yes. They always read the 23rd Psalm at these things and you didn't do that. Would you read the 23rd Psalm?" "Certainly," Jim said. And he did.

Another man spoke up, "There is a passage in the 3rd chapter of John which says that the spirit of God goeth where it leadeth and you cannot tell on whom the spirit of God falls. Could you read that passage?" And he did.

Then one of the men said, "Would you read to me and to all of us that passage that talks about the love of God, that nothing can separate us from the love of God?"

And Jim said, "I turned to these homosexual men and said quite simply, 'Neither height nor depth, nor principalities nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, neither life nor death, nor anything, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'"

Jim said nothing was more thrilling than to say to these men, who had been so ostracized and hurt by the church, that God still loved them and

that nothing could separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is what God promises . . . to always be with us helping us through difficult times. God promises to remain by our sides providing the strength we need to persevere through hard, difficult times. God promises to be with us carrying us through.

God also promises to work for good for those who love God. We can trust God will work through the hardships, sufferings and difficulties of our lives redeeming them by bringing good out of them.

And God promises to always love us--God will never stop loving you and me. God will never give up on us, will never abandon us. We may turn our back on God, but God will never turn God's back to us. Live in the confidence that no matter what happens, God is your help and strength.

At the end of World War II, Winston Churchill was at a dinner and a man stood up and said, "At the Battle of the Bulge we had evidence that the British soldiers were braver than the Nazi soldiers. The Battle of the Bulge proved that." When Churchill got up to speak, he said, "That is not true. The Nazi soldiers were just as brave as the British soldiers. But the British soldiers were brave for five minutes longer."

That's what I am encouraging you to do, be brave and hang in there. When life is difficult, hard and ugly--hang in there! Live in the confidence that God will carry you through difficult times giving you strength, working for good in the situation. God will be right there with you--loving you through all that goes on.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. No matter what you have done, no matter what has gone on in your life, you have a God who cannot help but love you. Loving you is God's nature and God will love you until the very end. Even in death God will be there and God promises eternal life to those who trust in God and walk according to God's purposes. Amen.