

McCabe United Methodist Church
Advent & Christmas 2015: “Cross My Heart”
Incarnation: The Promise is Born
Meditation for Christmas Eve (Luke 2:1-20 & John 1:14)
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In the middle of this past summer, a bunch of folks from McCabe got together to brainstorm ideas about a worship theme for the seasons of Advent and Christmas. The guide for this brainstorming session was a set of Scripture readings for the four weeks of Advent – the four weeks leading up to Christmas – along with the readings for Christmas itself.

As we read through and discussed all of these Scripture readings, the word “promise” came up over and over again. We couldn't escape it and, as a group, we decided our overall theme for Advent and Christmas this year needed to revolve around the idea of promise. Eventually, the title for our theme became “Cross My Heart.”

For thousands of years, promises have been made and then sealed or signed with something physical. When God promised to never again flood the entire earth, the sign of the promise was a rainbow in the sky. When we make a promise through legal contracts, we add our written signature as the physical sign of our participation in that promise.

Historically, marriage promises were “sealed” on the wedding night and, today, we also seal our marriages with rings – the rings husbands and wives wear are physical signs to the world that this person belongs to someone else...that they are not for the taking.

In baptism, the newly baptized person is promised to God and, after offering the baptismal blessing with water, we pastors make the sign of the cross on their forehead: this is a physical sign, a seal that the newly baptized person has now been promised to the family of Christ...like a spouse with a wedding ring, the cross on the foreheads of the baptized is a spiritual sign, claiming that each baptized person belongs to God and cannot be taken by any sort of enemy spiritual force.

As children, we may have sealed promises with a “pinky swear,” with some sort of “blood oath,” or by saying, “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” And, as a kid, it was serious business if you sealed or “signed” a promise with any of those things!

Well. Thousands of years ago, God made a very serious promise to send a Savior to the world. This Savior would bless God's people with forgiveness from sin, with guidance in the midst of life, with peace where there is violence, with hope where there is despair.

When God made the promise that a Savior would come, there wasn't clarity about how and when it would happen. God simply promised with words...and then humanity waited.

And so it was that, one night 2,000 years ago, a bunch of shepherds were in the fields outside of a dinky, nothing town called Bethlehem. The shepherds were outside of town because, well, that's where the sheep had to be... but no one would have really wanted the shepherds to be in town, anyway.

They didn't have the best reputation: shepherds were known to be sneaky...not particularly trustworthy, even though their job was extremely important. They smelled awful because they worked with livestock and so people in town preferred it when they stayed a ways away.

Shepherds weren't used to being the first ones to learn anything important or of great value, so imagine their surprise when an angel appeared before them saying, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

God had kept that age-old promise – and it was a promise for all people. After all, the news of the Savior's arrival wouldn't have come first to shepherds if it weren't meant to be good news of great joy for everyone.

God had sent a Savior...and the seal – the sign – of this kept promise was a baby in a manger. A helpless infant in an animal's feeding trough.

Not a triumphant military leader surrounded by a mighty army, and not a political leader riding into town with a megaphone and an entourage. Instead, God sent our promised Savior in the quiet of a stable, in the vulnerability of a baby...and the first ones to receive word it had happened were shepherds – the lowest of the low. That is how God keeps promises.

In our four biblical gospels, only three tell any sort of Christmas story. Mark doesn't bother with Christmas at all in his Gospel. The Gospel of Mark begins when Jesus is all grown-up and ready to begin his ministry of teaching and healing.

Matthew's Christmas story focuses on Joseph and the wise men. (We'll hear the story of the wise men when we celebrate Epiphany the first weekend in January.)

And Luke is the Gospel writer who gives us most of the characters and props in our nativity scenes: the holy family in the stable, the shepherds, angels, animals, and, of course, the manger.

Then, in the Gospel of John, Christmas is mentioned in one single verse, John chapter 1, verse 14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." God's eternal Word – the Christ who was present with God, as part of God, since the beginning of time – entering this world to live among us. It's John's Christmas story.

This is called "The Incarnation"...God becoming human...mighty Savior in fragile flesh...the promise born among us.

In Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible called The Message, John 1:14 reads this way: "And the Word became flesh, and moved into the neighborhood." Isn't that great? "And the Word became flesh, and moved into the neighborhood..." My neighborhood. Your neighborhood. The neighborhoods that scare us.

The baby Savior in the manger is God's way of saying, "I'm here for all of you. No place isn't good enough for me. No person isn't worthy of my mercy. No neighborhood isn't deserving of my presence. I'm here to be good news of great joy for every single one of you. Rich, poor, middle-class...black, white, brown...happy, sad, broken, friendless, fearful. All of you. You all deserve my promised presence and you deserve it no matter what is happening in your life or in the world. I will be with you," God says to us. "Cross my heart."

This is how we know we worship a God who keeps promises: because God was incarnate among us – born to us in Jesus Christ...a helpless infant, a reminder of God's constant presence with each of us.

It's the good news we celebrate this day/night. It's good news of great joy today, tomorrow, and always. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas.