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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Pentecost 4, Proper 9C, Wednesday, July 7, 2019

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our God is a promise-making God. The Lord has filled Holy Scripture with promises to the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. From the beginning of Scripture to the end, from the beginning of time to now, our God has made promises to his human creatures, involving himself in our lives, involving himself in our future, binding himself to us. These promises are much of the reason that we as the Church do what we do. Without them, we would be little more than adrift in this world, left to our own ideas, left to our own devices.

These promises we often bring to our remembrance in times of difficulty or despair. This morning we already heard the Lord promise to us once again that when we confess our sins, he shows his faithfulness and justice not by holding our sins against us, but by forgiving us of our sins, and by cleansing us. Last week we heard the Lord promise to us that we have been set free for true freedom: “for freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). We are freed to live in Christ’s own Spirit, and to live fruitful lives, growing in Christ and having grow in us the fruit of Christ’s Spirit: love and joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control. We are promised that if we remain in Christ, these things will all grow in us more and more.

We are promised elsewhere in Scripture, that living in Christ now will grow into eternal life and blessedness with him and his Father, that some day we shall be fully reconciled to one another and to the rest of creation, and most of all to God.

But all of these promises center on one particular promise; all of these promises flow out of one central promise. This great and central promise is often overlooked and neglected because it is so very simple. Perhaps the promise is also overlooked, or neglected, because we don’t think it to be all that important, but more on that later. The promise is this: that Jesus will be with us, that Jesus will be with us, both now and forever. The great promise of the Gospel, the promise that founds all of the others, the promise that makes all of these other promises possible, is that Jesus himself will be with us.

Well over one hundred years ago, our forebears in the faith embarked on a bold and costly endeavor: to build a place of worship for themselves and for generations afterwards. I imagine that they had to cut pretty deeply into their pockets, which I imagine were lined rather thin from working in the local breweries and other working-class jobs. But when given the choice of what to name the place that they would gather for worshipping God, they chose one that meant that God was with them. They chose Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” We have all received from their work and labor, we have all received from their faith in the Lord, and we are today living witnesses that the Lord is indeed with us.
At the end of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, it is precisely this that Jesus promises before he ascends to heaven: “behold, I will be with you, even unto the end of the age.” In the night that he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus prayed for those first disciples, and all that would follow after them, in what is called the High Priestly Prayer. Jesus there prays to his Father, with these words: “Father … the glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfectly one. ... Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am” (John 17:20–24, rsv). That we may be with Jesus, and that Jesus may be with us, this is the Christian life. This is the whole content of our hope. This is the source of our faith. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, there is nothing that can stop him from being with us, not even our own death. Because he is raised to the Father’s right hand, there is nowhere that he cannot be so that he might be with you, and with me.

But you might be wondering: where in our Gospel lesson did Jesus promise this? After all, Jesus was speaking to the disciples that were already following him around Israel. And, is it not the case that what Jesus did was send the seventy away from himself, “ahead of him[self],” as the text says? Jesus says this to the seventy disciples, “Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3, rsv).

Jesus indeed sends his disciples out, away from himself. But he does not send them away hopeless, to be merely devoured by those wolves. The last thing that he says to them before they go is this: “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16, rsv). The promise that Jesus makes to them, and the promise that Jesus makes to us, is that Jesus is with us wherever we go. Jesus puts this in some rather astounding terms. Jesus in fact likens the closeness that Jesus has with us to the closeness that Jesus has with his own Father. To reject Jesus is to reject his Father, because where Jesus is, his Father is with him. To reject Jesus’ disciples, to reject the ones that speak his words in this world, is to reject Jesus. This puts in a different key what Jesus prayed to his Father in the High Priestly Prayer, that we would be one, as Jesus and his Father are one. Jesus and his Father have been one from all of eternity. They have been in total and complete agreement, of one will and mind, from before the universe was created. This same oneness, this same unity of heart and mind, is the entire reason that the Word of God was made flesh. No longer is the Son of God only one with his Father and their mutual Spirit. Now, because the Son of God became also the Son of Man, Jesus Christ is one with us, bringing us to share in his mind and will, weaving us into his own life and Spirit.

So Jesus being with us is not merely as one person walks alongside of another. It transcends that closeness. It includes that closeness, but it is also so much more than that. About this closeness and nearness, Saint Augustine once said that Jesus is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. His actual words were, “Jesus is more inward to us than our inmost self.” I am not entirely sure that in the end that makes perfect sense, but Saint Augustine is trying to express what may well just be inexpressible: how close, how intimate, how near the Lord is to you and to me.
So it is of great significance, then, that Jesus was already showing this with those first disciples. Jesus was sending them away from himself, to show that he was with them even when they could not physically see him. For, is this not the same situation that you and I have inherited? We do not see Jesus, but he has not been absent. Our closeness with Jesus is not dependent upon our ability to see him.

It is also of great significance, though, the precise way that Jesus is present with the disciples that he sends out. He doesn’t tell them, whoever sees you sees me. The promise has to do with words. After all, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Faith comes not by seeing, but by hearing. Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God, the Word made flesh. This Word is not a silent word. We sang a hymn a couple weeks ago, that was a good hymn, but had a line in it that was not well written. It said that the Spirit of God “interprets for us the silence of eternity.” That is one thing that eternity could never be. God is not silent. Eternity was filled with the infinite and unbounded and limitless speaking of the Word of God. This very same fullness of speech that is the Word of God did not scorn coming to earth to dwell amongst his human creatures. Neither does this same Word scorn coming now to continue to be amongst us. As our Old Testament lesson from next week puts it most powerfully: “the Word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart” (Deuteronomy 30:14, rsv). The Word of God literally comes to dwell in your heart, and to live in your mouth. As the Word of God made his home in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so too does the Word of God now come to make his home in our hearts and in our mouths.

This is the way that our Lord has promised to be with us: through the speaking of the message that he proclaimed. And what is this message, what is it that Jesus proclaimed? “Whenever you enter a town,” Jesus told the seventy, “say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:8, rsv). The message of the Gospel is that Christ has become King of the entire universe, that he is King of all kings, and that he himself is coming to us through this word. Where Christ is, there is his Kingdom. The Spirit of God, then, is not the interpreter of eternity’s silence, but the one who makes us able to hear what is being spoken, and to bring about faith from this spoken word and to bring about faith in this spoken word.

In this we should hear both a warning and also a promise. When we hear the words of Holy Scripture, we must be careful that we do not in any way reject what we hear. No matter how difficult the words might be, no matter how strange, no matter how impossible they might seem, let us receive them as coming from the very mouth of Jesus, let us cling to them as the very words of life. For, that is indeed what they are. That is not just true for the Gospels, nor is it just true for the New Testament. As Paul says in 2 Timothy, chapter 3, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (v. 16). All of Scripture is given to us so that we might hear Jesus’ voice, and know him.

But, as is often the case, the warning in this passage is enclosed within a promise. The promise is that when you hear the Word of God read, it is nothing other than Jesus’ own voice that you can and may hear. And, when you are the one who reads the Word of God, your voice is being joined so intimately with Jesus’ own voice, that Jesus himself can be heard.
This is not just the case with reading the actual words of Holy Scripture, though. When Jesus sent out the seventy, he didn’t send them out with scrolls. Jesus sent them out with nothing but a message. Perhaps that is the mystery behind why Jesus sent the seventy out with no money, no purse, not even sandals. For they needed nothing but the message of Jesus on their lips, they needed nothing but the Word of God. And what did they discover when they went out with this message alone? They found that even the demons are subject to this message. They found that hell itself could not stand up against the Word of God. Nothing will stand against the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. No one and nothing will have victory over the Word of God.

This same word, is near you now, in your mouth and in your hearts. This same Word has been given to you so that you too might be part of the great harvest of the Lord, and so that you might speak the words of life to this dying world. This same Word is none other than Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives for you, who promises to be with you always, to bring with him all of the promises of the Gospel, life and peace, joy and blessedness, and, in the life to come, he will present you holy and blameless to his own beloved Father, who is blessed forever. Amen.