

“A Promise, A Power, A Presence”

It begins with a promise . . . All of faith begins with a promise.

When God had called Abram in the city of Ur, God had promised that Abram would have a new land, become the father of a great nation, and would be blessed with many descendants. On the basis of that promise, Abram walked away from his father’s house, his land of origin, and the comforts of family, friends, and culture, and ventured forth. At age seventy-five, (I can relate; I’m just about at that point) Abram is uprooted and goes out on the basis of what may seem like pretty flimsy evidence of the potential for success. On the basis of that promise Abram chose to trust, and as sign of that trust and as a pledge of the promise, Abram’s name is changed to Abraham.

All faith begins with a promise.

We would likely be most understanding if Abraham’s faith began to waver somewhat after twenty-four years when very little of that promise seemed to be coming through. He had no land to call his own, save a burial plot for himself and his wife. He had no children. Life could not have seemed especially blessed for him at this point on his journey. I would have to wonder if, at age ninety-nine, I would be able to hold on to much hope about the future.

But then three mysterious strangers show up at Abraham’s tent one day. Strangers, for most of us, can arouse suspicion and fear — with some strangers, the level of anxiety may be slight; with others, we may be quite wary. In the tradition of nomadic peoples everywhere, and especially those who traverse the deserts and wilderness of the Middle East, Abraham offers grand hospitality. In that culture, even an enemy is made welcome, because they understand that, in such a brutal environment, to turn someone away is tantamount to a death sentence. But even though it is the custom, Abraham goes further than what is required; he is generous in his caring for these strangers.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us: ***“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*** (13:2) Abraham was unaware that he was “entertaining angels” until they were ready to depart, at which point they emphasized the promise once more.

Imagine that scene . . . Here is ninety-nine-year-old Abraham and ninety-year-old Sarah hearing that the promise of a child is still in the works. The child that is born to them is named Isaac, “laughter,” because at this news of her pregnancy Sarah laughs — who could blame her? This is remarkable on so many levels: That a ninety-year-old woman could be fertile; that two nonagenarians could be sexually active; That upon hearing this news Abraham didn’t laugh, and Sarah didn’t pass out!

Such is the strength of the promise . . . so deeply did they trust that promise . . . for them, the promise was all that mattered.

Such promise comes with power.

St. Paul, in his opening words to the church at Colossae, wants those Christians to zero in on that power. It is the power comprehended in Christ Jesus. Many scholars believe that the first fifteen verses of this section form a hymn. They are divided on whether or not Paul wrote the hymn or is quoting it. In either case, he uses it to set up a vision, an understanding of Christ that takes his readers well beyond the simple carpenter of Nazareth. Paul is intent that his Colossian audience focuses on the power and majesty of Jesus.

[This, by the way, is why some people accuse . . . blame . . . accost . . . deride St. Paul for “inventing” Christianity. If he did compose this hymn, they may have a point; but the likelihood is that Paul was using a piece of liturgical praise already known to his readers.]

What does this hymn tell us? First, that Christ is cosmic . . . He did not and does not simply exist as that person in history named Jesus. Second, He is both the author and the reason for creation.

[Let me take this moment to express a concern regarding the Nicene Creed, in which we confess that Jesus Christ is *“God from God, light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father,”* very much in keeping with the words of St. Paul in this hymn. But then we go on to confess, *“Through Him all things were made,”* and the way in which that is intoned would lead anyone listening to think we are reiterating what we already confessed in the First Article, that the Father is Maker. It’s almost as if we are saying: *“Christ is of one Being with the Father, and don’t forget, the Father’s the one who made heaven and earth.”* But that’s precisely not what the Creed seeks to convey — namely, that Jesus is the One through whom *“all things were made.”*]

Back to the hymn: Thirdly, Paul zeroes in on the primacy of Christ: First above all things (to a Jewish audience, these would have been “fightin’ words,” but Paul is more expansive with this Gentile audience). Fourth, even more deeply than primacy is centrality. Listen again to the hymn: ***“He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”*** That is an astonishing claim: The only reason you and I and this whole planet, and indeed the entire universe exist is because Christ holds it together. That is one huge, whopping claim for exclusivity.

Such power, Paul goes on the argue, is what has brought the Gentiles (his readers) to God. Paul’s Jewish heritage would have inculcated in him the notion that only Jews could approach God, and could be included under God’s reign. For them, everyone else was “outside.” But, in Christ, Paul came to realize that no one is outside the realm of God’s embrace.

This is how that worked: ***“[Christ] has now reconciled [you] in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him . . .”*** This is the power of Christ . . . a power Luther would come to recognize looked like weakness (Luther called it “left-handed power”) . . . a power consummated in the release of power by Christ giving himself over to die for us. That power continues to work, because the need for reconciliation is ongoing. You and I do not

“continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard . . .” Consequently, what God has done in Christ is something we need to be reminded of again and again.

The promise and the power require a presence.

When Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha (the “certain village” Luke records we know from John’s Gospel to be the village of Bethany), He was the focal point.

Before we delve into this account, let me say a word in Martha’s defense: Nowhere does Jesus accuse Martha of being bad, unfaithful, or even wrong. He does say that Mary chose *“the better part,”* which suggests that Martha’s choice, while good, was not the better of the two. What Martha chose was the path of service, but apparently her choice was not bringing her the joy it should have brought. Jesus recognizes that she is *“worried and distracted”* (ADHD?), not focused and secure. Martha is doing what Martha is doing, however, in service to Jesus but, like many of us, she cannot understand why anyone else would have chosen a different way to do things.

Okay, so both are good, but Mary’s choice is better. There is a principle at work here we would do well to acknowledge: the choices in life are often not good or evil, but bad versus worse and good versus better. When we are presented with nothing but bad options, we try to choose that which is not the worst. But all too often we are willing to settle for the good (or maybe even the mediocre) when God is offering us the best. Lack of insight . . . laziness . . . fear . . . stupidity . . . sinfulness . . . all of these enter into the equation as we go through our daily lives, and often they keep us from seeing and/or choosing the best.

What makes Mary’s the better choice? First, she opted for presence. One of the first insights I gained through the doctoral process was that I had spent most of my life in what now I perceive as performance-based religion. I discovered that I was placing my identity, not in Christ, but in

the work I was doing for Christ . . . and that in the process, I was actually cutting myself off from the very presence that I needed to do the work I said I wanted to do. Mary chooses to be with Christ, to draw from Christ what she needs. Many times, I know that I have put that off for later, convincing myself that I had in me all that I needed to press on. Three syllables can respond to that: ba-lo-ney!

How much time do you spend in the presence of Christ? I now know people who spend three, four, five hours a day just basking in His presence. These people then lead highly productive lives: they write, they counsel, they teach, they serve in many different ways. I'm not there . . . I keep telling myself I want to get there, but maybe I'm just too much a Martha (ADHD?) to get it together. I do know this: When I (that unholy trinity I so commonly worship — me, myself, and I) feel drained spiritually, when serving is just leaving me feeling beat up, I don't need to just take a rest, I need to find the presence. When I have had one of those weeks: emergency hospital calls, people coming for assistance every day, frustrations mounting by the hour . . . I understand "**worried and distracted by many things**". In such moments, I could say to myself: "*You really need to go to that outing and play golf.*" But I need "the better part" — time with Jesus to recharge.

Presence brings the promise with power. The promise of the Gospel can become a matter of dispassionate objectivity. As I wrote that, the words of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* came to mind:

*"Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through;
First from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?
Don't talk of stars Burning above; If you're in love, Show me!
Tell me no dreams Filled with desire. If you're on fire, Show me!"*

Sometimes I wonder if what we do in worship isn't all blather because we are not really focused on the presence of Christ with us. Why gather together at all? Is it not because Christ has Himself invited us into His presence? Oh, you say, "*But Pastor, Jesus is everywhere.*" That may be true, but it is not particularly helpful. "*But there are times during my day*

when I am deeply aware that He's with me.” Praise God! That not the point, either. Yes! You may invite Jesus to be with you at any time, and you may have a real sense that He is there, especially in a time of need. But that is somewhat “you focused.” Worship is Christ-focused.

And the focus is this: Christ is the embodiment of the promise, the center of the power, and we draw from Him when we listen to and heed His invitation to come to Him, not He to us. Now He has promised: ***“I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you.”*** (John 14:18), but He has also invited us, ***“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”*** — in place of the word “rest” there, you can insert “presence.”

Christ is what we need . . . He is the better part that cannot be taken from us. So when you get worried and distracted (the Greek word has a root meaning of “dragged”), when the promise is but flickering light for you, when you have trusted long enough in your own resources to get you through, when it feels like all the power is gone . . . come into the presence of Christ and experience ***“the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”***

Amen.