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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this season of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, this time of year is a time of PROMISE and FULFILLMENT.

That is what Santa Claus would appear to be about, is he not?

We tell Santa Claus what we would like at Christmas and Santa Claus takes it under advisement, such that Santa's PROMISE to all good little girls and boys becomes FULFILLMENT on Christmas morning.

Yes, PROMISE and FULFILLMENT is what this time of Advent and Christmas revolves around.

Promise and fulfillment.

And, if we consider our readings today, we see it is the same story with God and his word.

PAUSE

There in the prophet Isaiah, in our first reading, we hear the prophet announce God's promise.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

This is, of course, a reference to Jesse who was the father of King David, the greatest of Israel's kings.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

And here then, Isaiah is prophesying the coming of a ruler who will renew David's royal line, as the introduction to the reading says in the bulletin Celebrate.

A ruler will renew David's royal line.

Here then is God's PROMISE.

And then we get the fulfillment in the gospel reading.

We hear John the Baptist declare that a powerful ruler is coming, such that John says, "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke."

PROMISE and FULFILLMENT.

Yes, the time of Advent and Christmas is about PROMISE and FULFILLMENT.

PAUSE

Indeed, Matthew's Gospel as a whole wants to make this argument abundantly clear.

Matthew does in fact demonstrate over and over again how that which was prophesied, or PROMISED long before, is now being FULFILLED.

In Matthew 1:18-23, Matthew talks about the birth of Jesus.

He talks about Mary giving birth to baby Jesus—Mary who was a virgin.

And then Matthew says, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'"

PROMISE and FULFILLMENT.

And then there is the story of the wise men, where they come to King Herod seeking the king who had been born.

And upon hearing what the wise men had to say, Herod inquired from the Jewish authorities about the Messiah.

And he is told that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, as the prophet Micah had said, "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

PROMISE and FULFILLMENT.

And then Herod, fearing this child king, decides to round up all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger. And Herod destroys them.

And Matthew tells us that this was to fulfill what the prophet Jeremiah had said, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loudly lamenting, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

PROMISE and FULFILLMENT.

And I could go on and on, but we get the picture.

The Old Testament prophecies, those PROMISES of God that came through the OT prophets, find their FULFILLMENT later at the time of Jesus's birth.

PROMISE and FULFILLMENT.

PAUSE

Now, truth be told, these OT prophecies at first glance were not about Jesus at all.

For instance, the prophecy in Isaiah about "a virgin conceiving and bearing a son, and his name shall be Emmanuel"...

This prophecy was not about Jesus at all.

No, the prophecy was made by Isaiah to King Ahaz, about a completely different situation than that of Jesus' birth.

Ahaz was a Jewish king, and in this prophecy, Isaiah was telling King Ahaz, who was fearing the destruction of his kingdom by opposing forces...

Isaiah was telling Ahaz in the face of his enemies that "God was with him" (Immanuel), and proof of God's presence was that a child would be born and before he became very old, those forces threatening to destroy Ahaz kingdom would be no more.

Biblical scholars believe that the child mentioned in this prophecy is in fact none other than Isaiah's own child.

The woman would then be Isaiah's wife.

And furthermore, the term for young woman here in Isaiah ("almah" in Hebrew) does not mean "virgin," but simply "young woman."

Only when the Hebrew gets translated into Greek does the Hebrew word for young woman get replaced by the translator with the Greek word for virgin (“parthenos”).

But “young woman” in the original Hebrew prophecy did not necessarily mean “virgin.”

All of this is by way of saying that it is quite interesting how the Old Testament prophecies get re-appropriated by the early Christian writer Matthew so as to speak to the birth of Jesus.

Indeed, biblical scholars believe that Matthew, when writing his gospel, searched out “proof texts” as they are called, in the Old Testament to include in his gospel to lend weight to his message, that what had been promised of old is now coming to fruition in the present.

In other words, the gospel writer Matthew was a big believer in “PROMISE and FULFILLMENT,” to the point that he gleans the Old Testament for proof texts to show conclusively that God makes promises and God fulfills God’s promises.

Now, I bring all this to our attention, not to rattle our faith in the Bible.

I bring all this to our attention, not to up end our trust in God’s word.

Actually, I bring this to our attention to do quite the opposite.

I bring all these examples of “promise and fulfillment,” I bring all these examples of “proof texts” to our attention for the specific purpose of emphasizing God’s integrity.

For when it comes to God, integrity was a highly valued aspect, maybe the most important of all aspects in ancient times.

Not only with respect to the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, but also with respect to God’s dealings in the Old Testament—particularly in relation to the promise of the covenant with God’s people Israel.

Yes, if there is one thing the ancients valued, and with which we as well value about God it is God’s integrity.

Now, this may sound somewhat strange to our ears, that is to speak of God’s integrity.

Usually, that is a word we use to speak about people, whether individuals are as good as their word, whether they have integrity.

We use this word to describe someone who indeed does what they say they are going to do.

If a person fulfills their promise, if they do what they say they were going to do, we say they have integrity.

If not, we say they lack integrity.

But, to speak about God as having integrity seems a bit strange.

For, of course, God has integrity. If God is anything, certainly he is one who has integrity.

PAUSE

But let's imagine for just a moment a world in which we could not trust God's word.

Let's imagine our God as one who lacks integrity.

What kind of God would that be? Imagine a God who is fickle, a God who promises one thing one minute and then decides not to do what was promised.

In short such a God would be seen as a God who laughs at us, who scoffs at us, a God who toys with us.

If we truly could not trust God's word, if indeed God lacked integrity, we might as well chuck the Bible out the window.

What good would it do us to put our faith in God's word?

So we see how important it is for God to have integrity.

And we see how important it is for us as people to have integrity.

Integrity really is the glue that holds our society together.

Integrity is the underpinning of any sense of order in our world.

If we can't trust one another as people to do what we say we will do...

If we can't rely on one another to keep our word, then all sense of certainty in life, all sense of assurance and well-being in life breaks down.

Without PROMISE and FULFILLMENT, without integrity, the world order deteriorates pretty darn quickly.

Last week, I spoke about the commodity that is hope, I spoke about how that commodity is even more precious than money and time.

And today I would say that nearly as important as hope is the commodity that is integrity.

PAUSE

So the time of Advent and Christmas is very good time to remember integrity and its importance in our world.

This is the time of year when we remember that our God is a God of integrity. God fulfills what God's promises.

God sends us a Messiah who is Christ the Lord.

God had prophesied through the words of the OT prophets to do this.

Sure, those prophecies may have been re-appropriated...

Sure, those prophecies at first had spoken about circumstances quite different from the birth of Jesus...

Sure, those prophecies were transformed so as to become "proof texts" about God's Son...

But, what that tells us, what the re-appropriation of texts tells us, is that God's word is seen as some living, breathing thing.

God's word is has life. It does not fulfill its purpose for just one people in just one time and place.

No, God's word does not speak to just one instance in history.

No, our forebears of the faith at the dawn of Christianity understood God's word as being able to be revisited, to be able to be re-interpreted to speak to their circumstances.

PROMISE and FULFILLMENT is such that PROMISE can become NEW FULFILLMENT.

In other words, God's integrity continues throughout the ages.

So then, God's word is always speaking to God's people, generation after generation.

And so, we just need to engage God's word to see how its power can be cracked open in our present world.

How might God's word be speaking to us today? How might God's word be speaking to the whole human family today?

PAUSE

Maybe God's word for us is just as simple as John the Baptist's message, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Maybe, God's promise for the fulfillment of a better world is as simple as hearing John's message yet again and taking it to heart in our present time: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Repent, world—stop your wayward ways.

Stop your ways that oppose God's ways.

Stop your injustice toward those who are oppressed.

Stop your indifference toward those who are in need.

Stop your insatiable appetite for more at the expense of other people.

Stop your greed, your avarice, your coveting, your self-deceiving, your arrogance, your self-righteousness...

Stop, repent, turn around and go in the right way, go the way of the Lord.

Perhaps, that is the promise from God through his prophet John the Baptist...perhaps that is God's word for us, and the fulfillment of that promise is none other than a better world, a better life for all humanity.

Perhaps that is the re-interpreted, re-appropriated message for us today—simply "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

And if we do that, if we as a human family truly repent, God who is one of great integrity, will reveal to us the fulfillment of a new and better world, such that the kingdom of heaven will come near.

That is the promise of God...may it be fulfilled for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.