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Our Saviour/St. Stephen  
Advent 2  
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Sisters and brothers in Christ, 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.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, if you were to ask my wife Kathy what is her most favorite poem, she would tell you without hesitation "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," by Robert Frost.

And, I have to say that that poem is one of my favorites as well.

For not only does the poem describe a beautiful pastoral setting, that is, portraying an idealized version of country life.

In this case, a rural, evening, wintry scene.

Not only does the poem describe a beautiful setting, it also has a profound message.

And as the poem is quite short, only four stanzas, I beg your indulgence as I offer now a reading of the poem.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, by Robert Frost.

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Just beautiful, right?

But I want to highlight the last stanza, which again says,

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

And herein then is the profound message Robert Frost wishes to convey.

That all of life is comprised of promises.

The traveler in the poem says "I have promises to keep," and then says twice over, "and miles to go before I sleep."

And no doubt, Robert Frost, is wont to say that not only does the traveler in the poem have promises to keep before he/she can sleep, and so must continue his/her evening journey...

That is one understanding of "and miles to go before I sleep."

But, Frost is also saying that we all have promises to keep in our journey of life, until that great sleep called death.

That is why Frost doubles the last line, for the traveler has miles to go before the end of his journey and he/she can sleep.

And we have miles to go before we will sleep.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Yes, life is comprised of promises.

Promises to our spouse.

“I promise to be faithful to you until death part us. I promise to care for you and to love you.”

Promises to our employer.

“I promise to show up on time and I promise to do the work I am contracted to do.”

And the employer promises to pay us for the work we do.

Promises as well to our friends.

“I promise to call you or text you. I promise to let you know what’s going on in my life. I promise to meet you for coffee.”

Promises to our society.

“I promise to be a good citizen. I promise to obey the law. I promise to pay my taxes.”

Yes, life is filled with all sorts of promises, spoken and unspoken promises.

We all have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep.

Indeed, promises are how human society functions, on the backbone of promises.

And it is when we don’t keep our promises that things start to go awry.

PAUSE

And Friends, promises are not just how human beings get along in life, but they are also how God go about things, too.

God makes promises, and God fulfills God’s promises.

To be sure, one way to understand the Bible is as a book of promise and fulfillment, promise and fulfillment.

God promises Abraham and Sarah that they shall have an heir, a son, and Isaac is born.

Promise and fulfillment.

God promises Abraham that Abraham’s family will be a blessing to the nations of the earth, and Abraham’s great grandson Joseph stores up grain in Egypt during

the years of plenty, so there is enough food to feed the nations of the world, when a famine strikes.

And so, Abraham's family proves to be blessing to the nations of the world.

Promise and fulfillment

God promises Moses that he will lead God's people to the Promised Land, and it comes to pass.

Promise and fulfillment.

God promises to David that David's son Solomon will build a Temple to the Lord, and Solomon is born and when he becomes king he builds the Temple.

Promise and fulfillment.

I could go on, but the point is clear.

God promises and God fulfills God's promise.

Yes, God likes to go about things by way of promises, too, just like us.

And, that pattern is evident still yet again in our readings for today.

In Isaiah 40, God speaks to Isaiah saying, "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..."

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

In other words, there is the promise of a precursor.

There is the promise of a forerunner, preceding the Messiah.

There is the promise of a herald, a prophet, a voice, who will precede the coming of the Messiah.

There is the promise and then there is the fulfillment.

And the Gospel of Mark tells us, John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, who proclaimed these words.

"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Promise and fulfillment, yet again.

Only granted, sometimes, God takes a little while for God to fulfill God's promises.

From the time that Isaiah was prophesying these words in Isaiah 40 to the time of John the Baptist's appearing, it may have been about 550 years.

That is a long, LONG time, to be sure.

I know if I promised to put out the trash, and I waited 550 years to fulfill my promise, my wife would be none too happy.

But sometimes God does take awhile to fulfill God's promises.

Even though the text from 2 Peter tells us that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

Regardless, I wouldn't try telling your spouse to be patient, for a thousand years is but a day to the Lord.

But the point is God does fulfill God's promises.

And in only a short time from now we will witness once more the single most significant of all incidents of promise and fulfillment.

In only two week's time, a fortnight in British lingo...

In only a short time we will witness yet again the birth of the Messiah, Jesus the Lord, who had been promised long, long ago.

Promise and fulfillment.

God makes promises and God will fulfill God's promises.

Christmas is about the fulfillment of God's promise.

PAUSE

And we might wonder, as some apparently did in early Christianity...

We might wonder, "Why? Why is the Lord so slow in coming? He promised he would come again, and so why has the Lord not returned yet?"

To which at least the author of 2 Peter responded by saying, "The Lord is patient so that all may come to repentance."

PAUSE

But timetables and schedules aside, Christmas again is really simply about the fulfillment of promises.

We hear promises in Christmas song lyrics...

“I’ll be home for Christmas. You can count on me.” That’s a promise being made.

The Christmas cards we write promise our love and well-wishes to family and friends.

The shopping stores both brick and mortar stores and online stores promise discounts and sales to get our business.

Even our beloved Santa Claus is caught up in the same promise/ fulfillment scheme.

We make our Christmas lists, with the hope that Santa will make good on his promise to bring us everything our heart desires.

Yes, there are a lot of promises floating all around us at this time of year.

And so, I got wondering...

I got to thinking...

That maybe Christmas is the best very reminder for us regarding what life is all about.

Maybe we need Christmas if for no other reason then to remember to appreciate the promises made to us and the promises we make to others.

We live in a sea of promises, swirling all around us.

We live in a sea of promises that sustain us in our lives.

We live in a sea of promises without which our lives would really fall apart.

And again the greatest promise is the one God has made to us, and which is fulfilled at Christmas.

For unto you, for unto all people is born, this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

And I find that interesting, that the Gospel writer Luke says, this baby is born to YOU, Shepherds, as if the Shepherds have a responsibility to this child.

In the say way, this child is born to US, such that we too have a responsibility to baby Jesus.

And what pray tell, is our responsibility—change diapers, provide a bottle a three in the morning, walk him when he is crying...

Sorry...been there...done that.

No, but we do have a responsibility, a promise to keep as a follower of Jesus.

We do have a responsibility, a promise to our Lord, as a follower of our Lord, to be a “little Christ” as Luther says to our neighbor.

That we will serve our neighbor, as Christ served us—that is our promise to God in Jesus Christ, in response to God’s faithful fulfillment of his promise to us as Christmas, we ourselves are to be servants.

We do have a promise to keep to Jesus, that we will be “little Christs” to others.

PAUSE

And so yes...we travel through this world like the traveler in Frost’s poem.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But we have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before we sleep,  
And miles to go before we sleep.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.