

The Promise of God

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This Sunday's texts:

[Hosea 5:15-6:6](#)

[Romans 4:13-25](#)

[Matthew 9:9-13](#)

The Gospel reading for this morning is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 9, verses 9 through 13:

⁹As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," He told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with Him and His disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning and greetings in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Many of you may not know this, but I have a low-level fascination with astronomy. Turn the lights off - a little surprise to keep you on your toes. I love space. You can kind of see that up there. That is a reasonable estimation of what the starry night looks like in San Jose with all of its light pollution, doesn't it? What we're looking at here is the starry sky and there's a little triangle of stars up in the top right, your right corner that begins the constellation Serpens and it comes down and across like what I guess astronomers would consider to be a snake. But if you were to go up And look at the same night sky, maybe out in the country, it's the same sky. You see the constellation right there in the middle. That's Serpens. And you can see so



San Jose, with light pollution



Same sky, in the country, with less light pollution

much more. Then if you pull out your telescope, this is looking in that same place once again. As you get closer, this is one of the spiral arms of the Milky Way galaxy and is highlighted right there in that little box in the corner. You know NASA launched in the 90s the Hubble telescope into low earth orbit to look deep into space and one of the things it saw as it zoomed in further was this. It's the Eagle Nebula and it just seems to get more and more beautiful the closer you look, doesn't it? If you really zoom in on that little circle right there, what you see is one of the most famous pictures in all of astronomy. These are the Pillars of Creation, 6,500 light years away - on the left, the Hubble telescope, and on the right, stunning picture from the James Webb Telescope.

I don't know about you, but when I see things like this, I'm reminded of Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands." and Romans 1:20, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made."

I think that's why the popular conversations that happened around astronomy always seem to delve into the religious. They can't help it. It always happens. People start looking into the cosmos and start asking the big questions. We feel small and we ask "Why am I here? Am I alone? Is there a God?" This led



Same sky, through a personal telescope



Eagle Nebula, through the Hubble Telescope



Pillars of Creation

the science fiction author, Arthur C. Clarke to answer that last question like this. “I try not to think about it [whether or not there is a God] because both answers terrify me.”¹ On the one side: a bleak, empty, loneliness; there's no God; we are alone, and none of this matters. On the other side: there is a God; I am not the Lord of my own life and the relationship between me and this Creator matters and I do not know where I stand before God.

In today's text from Romans, we come face to face with that very same question. One of the big questions of this life is: how do you know where you stand before God? How do we know if we are in right relationship with our Creator? When the Bible talks about this, it often uses the word “righteousness” or “righteous,” including in today's text. I believe the word is a Church Word. It's one of those words that we use in Christian culture and in a church setting that we often know how to use in a sentence, but you couldn't quite pin down a dictionary definition.

So what does it mean to be righteous? It's the quality, state, or characteristic of being in the right. In a Christian setting, it means being right before God. Simply put, to be righteous is to be in right relationship with God.

So how are we made righteous? The default approach of this world, and honestly I think a lot of Christians kind of slide back into this mentality as well, is to rely on our works, to be a good person. Most people live their lives depending on the Law. This becomes most obvious, at least to me, when we have conversations about heaven and hell, the afterlife. You'll often hear folks say of somebody who's recently passed away “I believe she's in heaven because she was a good person.” And yet that is law talk. That's not [Christian] hope. It's the kind of hope that's based on wishful thinking more than it is on a firm foundation because we don't really know if we've been good enough. And if you're honest with yourself today, have you earned a place in the presence of the perfect, holy Creator of the universe? I know I haven't. I know it. By my own power, I could only serve to make God's perfect kingdom less perfect.

Now this may all sound grim, a little heavy. But this is what happens in life when we start to focus on the Law, on the rules whether we are good enough, whether we are moral enough, whether we've done enough of the right things. It's enough to drive someone to despair. That is in the absence of Christ.

Because our hope for this life and the next is not based on wishful thinking, is it? It's not based on the idea that I've done enough good things to be on the right side of the line. Romans 4:1 “What then shall we say that Abraham, our

¹ Visions: How Science Will Revolutionize the 21st Century. Michio Kaku. 1997

forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?" What did Abraham find was the answer to the question? "It was not through the Law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith."² You see our righteousness; our right relationship with God comes by faith. We don't wrestle righteousness away from God, as if we were going to earn it, as if I put in the work and so, God, You owe me my paycheck. Rather by faith, we receive it, like a gift because He freely offers it to us.

This is "What does Scripture say?" Romans 4:3, quoting Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Now, as Christians in the Lutheran tradition, one thing that we do is we tend to think of the Old Testament as Law and then the New Testament as Gospel. The Old Testament is where the legalistic stuff happens and then the Good News comes in the New Testament. The truth is that for the patriarch, Abraham, God's promise came over 400 years before the Law came on Mount Sinai. It was always based on God's Grace and always has been based on His promise.

And the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and be guaranteed. It's by grace because it's God's gift to the undeserving, His gift from Christ, a gift of Christ, who comes to the sinner and the tax collector, who comes to the sick. It's guaranteed because God is faithful to His Word and we know because that Word was made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. It dwelt among us, walked with us, taught us, invited us to follow. It was the Word that was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification, a living Word which confirms that the promises that God has made, He's made for you and to you. Abraham, it says, "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised."³

Now I want to zero in on something today, because it dawned on me in a new way preparing my sermon this week. I often think that when I prepare a sermon, when I preach, and I know Pastor Jim feels the same way, it is just as much God ministering to me, touching my heart with His Gospel, as it is me sharing words with you. Think about this. At St Tim's, we talk a lot about the promises of God. That's a good thing, right? Here's what really hit me this week. I was thinking about God's promises and I realized He didn't have to make them. It's incredible to me that He made a promise to us at all. It's humbling. You see

² Romans 4:13

³ Romans 4:20-21

making a promise obligates the Pledger to do what He says. It obligates the One making the promise to fulfill it. Isn't that incredible then? That the God of the universe would choose to make promises to us? He didn't have to. He wasn't compelled to by any outside force. He decided to, because He loves you. He loves us and He wanted to. The Creator of the universe, the one whom according to the Scriptures spoke the stars into being by the breath of His mouth, the starry Host reformed, the One who drew out each star one by one and calls them by name has chosen to make promises to you because of His great love. He's bound Himself to us because He wanted to.

That means that God has chosen you, child of God. Let that sink in. The Creator of the cosmos, the One who dreamt up those Pillars of Creation and set them in the sky is also the One who knit you together in your mother's womb. He knows everything about you and with the same voice that He used to speak the cosmos into existence. He chooses to call you His own, to call you His daughter, His son, to call us His children. The One who knows you best, all of the things deep down that you hope no one ever knows, He knows. The things that you think people could not love me if they knew, He knows. He sees you and He still chooses you. He gives Himself for you. In His great love for you, He has bound Himself to you, by His promises. That's incredible, isn't it? That we are made right by faith in God who in accordance with His promises pours out His unearned and undeserved love on sinners and tax collectors like us because He wanted to.

He wants to know you and He wants you to know Him. So friends, find rest in the promises of God. Let the Gospel of Jesus Christ bring peace to your heart and soul. He's faithful to every one of His promises and those promises are for you, that you are forgiven, that you are loved, that you are His child, that you've been made righteous not by your ability to live up to some perfect standard, but because your Lord has said you are and His word is good. So be strengthened in faith this morning that God has the power to do everything that He has promised and that these promises that He made, not out of compulsion or obligation, but rather by His free choice, He is made because of His great love for us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are humbled today by Your love. We are in awe of Your faithfulness that with all of the might with which You brought this creation into existence, You rescue us from our sin and declare us righteous. So Lord, teach our hearts to have faith, to trust that Your promises are good and that You have the power to deliver on every single one of Your words. Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.