**4 Meditations for Christmas Day, 2019**

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| *Promise Made*  *Isaiah 7:14* | ***1*** | *Promise Kept*  *Matthew 1:18-24 (esp. 22-23)* |
| “The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” |  | 22All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” |

**ISAIAH 7: So that people know you have an effective plan.**

“Promises Made – Promises Kept” is a really cool theme for Christmas. That’s why I copied it from someone else! But, this theme can lead us just to sit back and think, “Promises. Made/kept. God is faithful. Ok, got it.” We want more than a “made/kept” checklist. We want to consider why each is an important promise.

The first promise is to give us confidence that God has an effective plan. You ever stand there with someone who has a plan, but from the get-go you are sure it isn’t going to work?

The effectiveness of God’s plan to save us is wrapped up in the identity of the Savior. Jesus’ identity was emphasized in his promise through Isaiah: ***“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and you will call him Immanuel*** [which means, ‘God with us.’]***”*** Interesting that the angel didn’t quote prophesies about *how* Jesus would save the world. Some of the Old Testament prophecies *did* mention the how. Instead, God focused on the *who*.

This is the important. All of God’s other servants had failures. The Bible is not afraid to display the faults of even godly people. If there is one thing that is clear throughout the Bible it is that people are sinful, sinful from birth, even the best people. That’s why the promised Savior had to be somebody different from all others. But how? How can that happen?

Facing the impossibility of a Savior coming from human stock, God said through Isaiah that he had a completely outside-the-box solution to our problem: a virgin would give birth to God with Us, Immanuel. The Savior would be categorically different from us, because he *had* to be categorically different from us.

The way it came about is so foolish to our reason that this is ridiculed by all who have not been touched by the Holy Spirit’s power. I can remember going to a third grade class in a non-religious private school. I had been asked to talk about Christmas. And yes, even one of the third graders had already been taught to scoff at the idea of a virgin-birth, however delicately I may have packaged it for those young ears. It is an offense to human sense to believe two things in this prophecy: that a virgin could give birth, and that God could be wrapped up in a human body.

It just doesn’t make sense, except that it makes perfect sense. The only way that we and our baggage of sin could ever be made right with a perfect God is someone greater than any of us, and yet who is one of us. Which is exactly who the Christ-child is. True God and true Man. That’s why God had to promise it beforehand, because if he hadn’t we might never accept it. But promised, we know that in this child we have the answer to sin our biggest problem. Amen.

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| *Promise Made*  *Micah 5:2* | ***2*** | *Promise Kept*  *Luke 2:1-7 (esp. 1-5)* |
| “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  though you are small among the clans of Judah,  out of you will come for me  one who will be ruler over Israel,  whose origins are from of old,  from ancient times.” |  | 1In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3And everyone went to his own town to register.  4So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. |

**MICAH 5: So that when it happens, people know it was no accident.**

You ever meet up with someone and they say something like, “Hey, I thought I might find you here.” But you thought, “Yah, right. If I had fallen off the face of the earth you never would have noticed.” You are pretty sure the only reason that you two stand face to face is, humanly speaking, complete accident.

Lots of things happen by accident. But the most beautiful things happen intentionally.

The girl isn’t real sure. It’s a big game, the first game she will start and she hopes dad will be there. But dad has lots going on: he is going to be out of town the day before, he has work that day. Dad promises he will be there. The promise is meant to assure the child. But there is more to it than that. It’s more than an assurance while she waits. When she sees Dad up in the stands, that promise encourages her again because it says, “I am here because I chose to be here. I moved mountains to get here. It’s no accident. I didn’t show up just because I didn’t have anything else to do. I am here out of a commitment to you.”

Jesus born in Bethlehem. What difference does that make? Lots of great people have obscure birthplaces. I mean, just go down to Hodgenville and visit the Lincoln Birthplace and imagine what that must have looked like 200 years ago. Jesus born in Bethlehem? Sure it’s a sign of Jesus’ humility. I get it. But the fact that God told people the birthplace 700 years before the fact tells us even more than that. This promise and its fulfillment are a sign of God’s care and commitment, his planning, if you will.

I believe that one of the reasons for all of God’s promises about Jesus’ birth (and we could have several others than the four we are looking at) is so that we know that God meant it. God didn’t accidentally send a Savior. It wasn’t a slip-shod long-shot last-minute fly-by-night operation that God stood back from and said, “Hey! That worked better than I expected!” No. From the first moment of our need, God had completed the beautiful plan of our salvation. Along the way, he enjoyed dropping little hints about the first Christmas present. He was assuring us that the present of a Savior would be wrapped up in an amount of love and concern and commitment that only God can bring to the table.

That is the marvel of the first five verses of Luke 2. We can misunderstand the as mere background information. But look at how God manipulates world events to get the mother and adoptive father of Jesus (and the little baby in the womb) from one tiny sleepy village to another! Look at how he had it all planned out way, way, way before it happened. Don’t you just love it when God’s wraps the presents!

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| *Promise Made*  *Genesis 3:15* | ***3*** | *Promise Kept*  *Luke 2:8-14 (esp. 10-11)* |
| And I will put enmity  between you and the woman,  and between your offspring and hers;  He will crush your head,  and you will strike his heel. |  | 10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. |

**GENESIS 3: So that people have hope**

Imagine being abandoned to the enemy. In March 1942, General Douglas MacArthur escaped from the Philippines by boat before advancing Japanese forces. Tens of thousands of soldiers and millions of civilians were left behind. Imagine! Especially with as cruel an enemy as the imperialist Japanese. Wouldn’t the thought of falling under their rule have been frightening? What hopelessness!

Very shortly afterward, before he even reached his final destination in Australia, General MacArthur made a famous speech, declaring by radio to the soldiers and civilians left behind: “I shall return.” General MacArthur wanted to give the people of the Philippines hope.

The situation in which MacArthur made his promise is the situation in which we often make our promises: fear. When fear is in the air, we promise. “Everything’ll be alright, I promise.” While it is often a promise we have no business making, the reason for making the promise is completely sincere. For people we love and care for, especially people who depend on us, we really really don’t want them to be afraid. We hate that. So we make promises to give them hope.

*“The day you eat of it you shall surely die,”* the Lord God had said. And when Adam and Eve listened to Satan in serpent form, they ate the forbidden fruit. Pretty quickly they found out the trouble they had gotten into. God told them that not only would they die, but they who had known perfection would first live out their years under God’s curse. God’s curses rained down upon their heads: “Pain, oppression, sweat, toil, frustration, death.”

Yet even then, God looked on them with concern. I don’t know what roused God’s pity for these sinners, but he could not leave them in fear. So he promised. He gave hope. Someone would come who would take hold of the great enemy, Satan, and crush his head. This deliverer would provide an antidote to the venom in Adam’s and Eve’s veins. Yet this deliverer would be struck on the heel, right where you would expect a snake to strike.

Surely this entire picture was a bit blurry yet to Adam and Eve. Yet they held on to that promise. Like kids in trouble they must have thought, “God was angry. But he wasn’t only angry! Did you hear that promise? I don’t exactly know what he meant, but it sounded so beautiful!” And they held tightly onto that promise, that hope against their fears. This first hope given in Eden matches exactly the hope the angels proclaimed to the shepherds. It cannot be said too often who Jesus is. He is introduced not as a teacher, a rebel, a pacifist, an example. ***“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”*** He is a Savior! That’s what the angels said: Savior! He came to save Adam and Eve and us from our sins.

On Christmas, God’s promise stops being a promise and becomes fulfillment. Thank you for ending our fear, Lord!

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| *Promise Made*  *Isaiah 9:2,6* | ***4*** | *Promise Kept*  *Luke 2:16-20 (esp. 17-18)* |
| 2The people walking in darkness  have seen a great light;  on those living in the land of the shadow of death  a light has dawned.  6For to us a child is born,  to us a son is given,  and the government will be on his shoulders.  And he will be called  Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. |  | 17When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. |

**ISAIAH 9: You talk about it**

My grandfather and grandmother wouldn’t have wanted me to tell you, but I’m going to anyway. They have passed away, so they can’t stop me. After I’ve told you, you can decide if I am being disrespectful. One thing I am going to do to honor their wishes is that instead of saying “he/she,” I am going to say “they” so that you won’t know who it was, whether my grandfather or grandmother. That’s the one thing they would have insisted on.

It started with a trip, a fall in the living room in about 1968. No one could explain it, they just tripped. There wasn’t a thing on the floor, no extension cord, no gather in the carpet, just a trip. Within months they (remember it’s either he or she, but I can’t tell you which) they were getting worse. Eventually it was a diagnosis of MS – multiple sclerosis – a disease which destroys your nerve cells so that at first you have trouble walking, then can’t, then arms have trouble. As the nerves die off, creeping ever closer to your core, swallowing becomes difficult, and eventually your vital organs fail and you pass away. Sometimes it moves quickly, sometimes slowly. For this one it took 31 years.

I can’t go through it all, so let me share one memory. When grandpa and grandma made their visits, the one would use a walker, and behind the other would follow hands and knees on the ground, lifting the other’s right foot, then left foot, then right foot, then left foot all the way from the car to the house. It could take fifteen minutes or more. Once inside the helper would stand up you would see pants torn and patched—because that’s what happens when your knees scrape across concrete.

You know why? Because one day back on July 5, 1942 the both of them said, “I do.” They promised. Their faithfulness to that promise compels me to tell you, in spite of their wishes.

God’s faithfulness to his promises, well it made the shepherds tell people, then Apostles, then ordinary people. It started in Jerusalem, spread through the province, then across the empire. But it wouldn’t stop there. People heard it and they took it to the barbarians outside the empire. Some of those evangelists died for it. But they couldn’t be quiet. Wave after wave crossed borders, cultures, languages and everything else to tell others so that now the Christian Church has reached every corner of our world. What God promised, ***“On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned”***—promise fulfilled!

When people keep their promises, people tell others. And when God keeps his big, bright, beautiful, world-saving promises, the whole world finds out! Amen!