

August 23, 2020

Majoring in the Minors
Zechariah: Promises, Promises
Zechariah 9:9-11

Opening words: Booker T. Washington tells of a former slave in his book, Up from Slavery. The man had made a contract with his master several years before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. The contract enabled the slave to buy his freedom for a certain amount annually. The slave was permitted to labor where and for whom he pleased. He went to Ohio for work and better wages. When the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect the now former slave legally owed his former master nothing. That did not matter to the former slave. He walked from Ohio to Virginia to place the balance of the money with interest into his former master's hand. He did it for one reason, because he gave his word. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom until he had fulfilled his promise." I tell you that story for one reason. To remind you God keeps his promises.

This is sermon number twelve in my thirteen-part sermon series, *Majoring in the Minors*. They are not considered minor because they are unimportant. They are considered minor because they are brief. Never forget, the Minor Prophets remind us of the great qualities of God. To date, we have looked at Joel, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Haggai. Next week, we finish with Malachi. Today, we look at Zechariah. He reminds us God keeps his promises. Our scripture reading for today is Zechariah 9:9-11. I have called this message *Promises, Promises*.

Zechariah 9:9-11 Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

¹¹ As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.

One of the great names in American history is Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924). A Democrat from New Jersey and former president of Princeton University, he served as

the 28th president of the United States from 1913-1921. In 1912, he ran against Bull Moose candidate Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) and Republican William Taft (1857-1930). In 1916, he ran against Republican Charles Evans Hughes (1862-1948). Many credited his victory to a promise summarized in a single phrase, *HE KEPT US OUT OF WAR!* Isolationism was the rage at the time in America. The country did not want to get involved in World War I because it was a European war. He broke that promise. Twenty-nine days after being sworn into office for the second time, Wilson asked a joint session of Congress for a Declaration of War against Germany. It was granted two days later. History has judged Wilson harshly for that move. Many believe he lied to the country. They say, he never intended to stay out of the war. Making a promise you never intend to keep is called a **criminal promise**.

I would like to say Woodrow Wilson is the only one who ever broke a campaign promise, but I am not going to lie to you. I would like to say Politician's are the only ones to break promises, but I am not going to lie to you. Sadly, we all know people who make empty promises. They make promises they never intend to keep for personal gain. Within the life of the church, there is no room for criminal promises. We follow the example of God, Himself, who always keeps his promises. It has been said, *people with good intentions make promises. People with good character keep them.* That leads us to our scripture lesson.

Many years ago, before man walked on the moon, before a civil war threatened to divide America, or before Columbus discovered a New World, there was a man who spoke for God. His name meant "the Lord has remembered," but we just call him Zechariah. He lived approximately 500 before the birth of Christ and he spoke to the postexilic Jews who were living in Judah. In other words, he spoke to Jews who had returned home after the exile. Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he was a member of a priestly family. He was a contemporary of last week's Minor Prophet, Haggai, so the historical background may sound familiar.

Those were complex times. The conqueror of Babylon, Cyrus of Persia, issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Approximately 50,000 Jews did just that. Two years later, the foundation was done, which caused political unrest in the area. They were seen by their neighbors as a new political force. Construction was halted to calm their neighbor's fears. The construction did not begin again until a new king sat on the throne, Dairus. He was interested in the religious traditions of his empire and encouraged the reconstruction. Haggai and Zechariah began to preach during his reign. Both prophets longed for spiritual renewal. Both prophets encouraged the people to reconstruct the temple. However, the messages of the two prophets are different. Haggai blamed the people, themselves, for their inactivity. The problem was not a lack of construction equipment. The problem was their mixed-up priorities. Zechariah told the people if they returned to God, then God would return to them. Zechariah speaks more of the about the coming Messiah than

any other Minor Prophet. That is what we hear in the scripture reading for today, Zechariah 9:9-11.

In our reading are two great promises. Verse nine speaks of his first coming. The words may sound familiar. We read them annually on Palm Sunday. Verse nine says, *"Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."* If you use your sanctified imagination you can see Jesus riding into Jerusalem in front of a great crowd. The crowd cheered for Jesus because they had grown tired of foreign rule. They wanted a political revolution. The problem was Jesus came for a spiritual revolution. He sacrificed himself in the next few days for the sins of the world. It looked bad on Friday but on Sunday he would be resurrected. It is the greatest moment in the history of the world. God promised a Messiah would come.

In verse ten, God makes a second promise, the Messiah will come a second time and unite the world, *"I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."* When Jesus returns, he will unite our fractured world. Many believe Jesus is returning soon. They may be right, but the time of his return is unknown. Not even Jesus knew when he would return.

Both verses stand side by side as a tag team duo offering hope for the generations to come. Our generation stands in the middle of these two great promises. We celebrate Jesus' first coming annually on Christmas Eve, but we are forced to wait patiently for his second coming. They are two great promises and we celebrate because God keeps his promises. If you believe God keeps his promises say, **"Amen!"** These is not the only promises made in the Bible. I read this week God has made 5467 promises in the Bible.

The people at the Spiritual Café say you can break the promises of God down into seven different categories. This is their list:

1. God promises to be with us
2. God promises to protect us
3. God promises to be our strength
4. God promises to answer our prayers
5. God promises to provide for us.
6. God promises us peace
7. God promises to love us

I like that list of seven. Perhaps, I will turn them, or a version of them, into a sermon series in the next few months. It is important to study God's promises because God does not break his promises. There are times we are like God. We make promises we intend to keep. Those are the promises we make we are committed to keep, like the promise you made to your spouse at your wedding to be faithful. We call those

completely committed promises **strong promises**. If you have ever made a strong promise say, "**Amen!**" Sadly, not all the promises we have made are strong promises. The problem is sometimes we break our promise because the situation changes. We call those **soft promises**. We are all guilty. I am guilty of making soft promises.

Several years ago, I was at Annual Conference at Lakeside, Ohio. I will admit it, I have been critical of Annual Conference through the years. It is part of my routine. However, it is more than a business meeting. It is also a revival and a reunion. For me that is the best part. I enjoy seeing people who served with me in the past. One-night, I went for a walk. I was walking on the dock on the shore of Lake Erie. I was on the other side of the bell tower when I saw an old friend. We came to this district the same year, but he retired several years later. We both smiled and shook hands. (You were permitted to shake hands at that time. They were pre-pandemic days.) He got me caught up on his retired life and asked me what was new. I said nothing because there was nothing new. He asked me how long I had been at here at Western Reserve. I gave him the answer at that time. It was fifteen or twenty years. He asked me what so many have asked me, "Why did you get to stay at Western Reserve? We are supposed to be itinerant?" Itineracy is when the Bishop moves you to a new church and you do not have a voice in the matter. I gave him my canned answer, "They are just trying to limit the damage to one spot." I laughed but he did not. He said, "Russ, you broke the promise you made at your ordination. You promised to be itinerant. You promised to go where where the Bishop sent you." Can I be honest with you? He was right.

I broke my promise to be itinerant. I have been told I have been black balled because I broke that promise. I really do not care. I broke my promise because the situation changed. It is easy to make that promise when you are young and single. It was easy to make that promise when you owned nothing and have no one. This is my twenty-sixth year here and I am glad I broke that promise. I have missed nothing by not moving. I have gained so much by staying. Many of my peers are retired because of the hardships they experienced because they moved. I do not see how damaging my family, making them move like Methodist gypsies, can bring glory to God. I am clueless how changing pastor's regularly is healthy for any congregation. It is like if your mom brought a different dad home every five years. Just look around and see then damage that has been done. However, I really broke my promise for one reason and one reason only. I believe in my heart of hearts this is where God has called me. On the night I was ordained, I promise to be itinerant, but the situation changed. I thought I was making a strong promise. I guess it was a soft promise. If you have ever made a soft promise say, "**Amen!**" Experience has taught me our strong promises come from deep within our hearts.

March 25, 1990 was a Sunday. I am confident of that because that was the day my daughter, Anna, was born. My wife, her mother, Kathryn had a busy day. In the morning, she led worship, preached, and baptized a baby. We went out to lunch with my in-laws and went home to lay down. When she got up, she announced she needed

to go to the hospital. When we arrived at St. Luke's Hospital in Cleveland, we were told what Kathy already knew. The baby was coming. The anxiety grew as the day passed. In time, they were taking her to the delivery room. They handed me a gown and a cap. They told me to sit on stool near Kathryn's head to keep me out of the way. I studied every detail of that room and listened to every word spoken by the staff. Then, it happened. Anna was born and before long a nurse handed her to me. As I sat on that stool, I examined every inch of her. She was perfect! For once in my life I did not worry about time. It was just me and her. That was a red-letter day in my life, and I knew it. Our entire world was waiting to hear Anna had arrived, but I did not care. I selfishly held her and made her a promise. I said, "I promise as long as possible I will be there for you." I made that promise thirty years ago. I believe, Anna would tell you I have kept my promise. I have always been there for her and, if possible, I always will.

If you want to discover your strong promises just look inside your heart. That is where God makes His promises. That is why God keeps his promises. It is not just true in Zechariah's generation five hundred years before the birth of Christ. It is true still stay. God keeps his promises. Do you remember the old saying? *People with good intentions make promises. People with good character keep them.* "How can you question God's character? If you are glad God keeps his promises say, **"Amen!"**