

## **A PROMISE GIVEN, A PROMISE KEPT**

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins

Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 61

Luke 17:20-21

This is a sermon about Jesus, which doesn't say much because all solid sermons lead us to Jesus. In John 12 some Greeks approached Philip and said, "We wish to see Jesus." That of course is the proper yearning of every true Christian congregation on a Sunday morning. You're here because you want to see Jesus. He is the founder of our faith, and it's hard to follow someone you don't know. But how well do we know him?

Here's an example: Were I to ask you, "Was Jesus married?" most persons, in or outside the church, would say, "No. He never married." But there's only one thing in the gospels to support that view: silence. Because a wife is never mentioned, we conclude there is no wife, but silence is no proof. Of the twelve apostles only Simon Peter is specifically mentioned as having a mother-in-law which of course means that he was married, but that doesn't mean that the other eleven were single, something almost unheard of in first century Judaism. Just about everyone married, male or female. My guess is that Jesus was probably married, but it's only a guess. No one will ever know. Silence on any issue, including matters regarding Jesus, is never proof.

Yet there is much we do know about Jesus, but even those facts we don't seem to recognize openly. For example, Jesus was a Jew. Jesus was not a Christian. I doubt that Jesus had any intention of beginning a new religion; he simply wanted to revitalize and transform Judaism. That didn't work. The Jews rejected him, and to this day they are awaiting a messiah whom we Christians have found in Jesus.

For that reason I have called this sermon *A Promise Given, A Promise Kept*, another way of describing the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament God promises a messiah; that's the promise given. In the New

Testament all twenty-seven books testify that the promise has been kept. But Jews today do not accept Jesus as Messiah, and of course they don't accept the legitimacy of the New Testament.

The promise given is recorded in many places in the Old Testament, but I have chosen for today the magnificent and poetic words of Isaiah 61, a passage read in part by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth.

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Jesus almost got killed for reading that passage because he claimed, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk 4:21) The Nazarenes took him to a cliffside and were prepared to throw him off the mountain when he miraculously escapes.

Jesus had made the claim that he was the promise kept, the fulfillment of what Isaiah described as the Messiah, the anointed one. A faithful Jew would never accept that, so they considered Jesus a blasphemer, for which the penalty was death.

Jesus has fascinated me for most of my life. Millions before me have had the same experience. I've often asked myself, "How did Jesus lovingly get his hooks into me?" Why am I tethered to him? Why is it that I can't escape him and don't want to?

Most of that answer has to do with my love for him. It's nice to know, as we were taught to sing in Sunday School, that Jesus loves me, but it is equally vital for us to love him.

People will come up to you from time to time to ask, "Do you know Mr. So-and-So," and you are forced to answer, "Well, I know *of* him, but I can't say I *know* him." There's a difference.

If you truly know someone, there is a sense of predictability about her or him. That doesn't mean that life is boring and that there are no surprises, but when you know someone, you do have a predictable sense of how they will act or react in just about every situation. I can tell you, proof positive, that my wife will never come home one day to announce, "I just got a tattoo."

Our relationship with Jesus is like that, but it takes a lifetime to develop, mature, and mellow. It's a long and gracious walk that brings us into relationship with Christ to the point that Jesus not only loves us, but we love him.

Remember, God made a promise thousands of years ago, and God kept that promise in Jesus. To know the God who made the promise you need to love the Promised One.

I can't speak for you, but I want to tell you today why I love Jesus. I love him because of his message. Jesus talks about a lot of things --- the church, ethics, relationships, money (his second most popular subject!), faith --- but his central message is the *Kingdom of God* (the reign of God or the domain of God).

Some years ago I took my second son Levi (who is 31 today!) on a tour of prospective colleges. One we visited has the most beautiful college campus I have ever seen. The University of the South, affectionately known as Sewanee, is located in Sewanee, TN. The campus is atop a mountain, and the school owns 10,000 acres. As you enter the campus there are two stone pillars on either side of the road and on one of the pillars is a bronze plaque which reads, "The Domain." That means that you are now entering the world or realm of The University of the South.

You see, when you love Jesus you enter the domain of God, what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. *It is where God rules and where you and I don't.* If you love Jesus, you love his message, and his message is the Kingdom of God.

Jesus not only announces the Kingdom, he ushers it in. Almost all the parables begin “The Kingdom of God is like . . .” If you love Jesus, he will lead you into a new realm, a world in which God reigns, and you’ll experience this if you learn how Jesus lived, for in his life God reigns perfectly and supremely. In other words, Jesus not only talks about the Kingdom of God; he is the Kingdom of God.

Or as Jesus says in Luke 17:

“The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is.’ Or ‘There it is.’ For, in fact, the kingdom is among you.”

Jesus is the promise kept.

So what happens once you enter the Kingdom? *You are given a new pair of eyes.* You begin to see things differently. Perhaps you will see things for the first time. You will see what others do not see, and you will begin to see as Jesus saw.

Jesus is always talking about those who have eyes but do not see, the blind leading the blind, and people who have logs in their eyes. There are stories about Jesus restoring sight to the blind. Jesus declares, “The eye is the lamp of the body.” How we see makes all the difference.

Here’s a story about a man who was given a new set of eyes. That allowed him to live in the Kingdom. His name is Louis Zamperini. He is 95 years old, and by any reckoning he should have died a much younger man.

In 1934 Louis won both the California championship and the national championship in the mile. He won a scholarship to the University of Southern California and eventually earned a place on the 1936 Olympic team, which means he was a teammate of Jesse Owens. He didn’t win a medal, but he did race well enough to catch the eye of Hitler who wanted to meet Louis. Zamperini shook his hand.

Three months before Pearl Harbor Zamperini enlisted in the Army Air Corps. On May 23, 1943 his plane was shot down, and eight of the eleven on board were killed.

For 47 days Zamperini and the pilot drifted in a life raft. (A third survival was in the raft but died after 33 days.) The two reached land on the Marshall Islands and were subsequently captured by the Japanese. He was tortured for the next two years, until the end of the war. During his imprisonment Zamperini was declared killed in action.

He returned home to a hero's welcome, married in 1946, but became an angry man destroyed by the sadistic torture at the hands of the Japanese. He turned to alcohol.

His wife Cynthia insisted that he attend a Billy Graham meeting. He was converted, instantly stopped drinking, and immediately felt total forgiveness toward all who had hurt and tortured him. In 1950 Zamperini went to Japan to meet the very men who had tortured him and to hug them all to show that he had forgiveness in his heart. He was now living in the Kingdom. He was seeing with the eyes of Jesus. He was carrying in his heart the Promise Given and the Promise Kept.

Or as Isaiah says in our reading today:

*For as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.*