

## 10-6-19 People of the Promise

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Has anyone ever made you a promise? And how much really today do we give credit to promises? Think about that for a minute. If somebody says to you, I promise to do something, do we really have a lot of hope in that still? Do we believe it or what demonstrates to us that the promise has been fulfilled? I don't know if this is true, but the impression that I have is that promises are sort of not really respected anymore.

What content do they have? What proof is there? Convince me that what you're telling me is true. What are the facts behind it? If I look up your promise on Wikipedia, does it say it's going to be fulfilled? Right? Can I Google it? And yet as Christians, we not only have to be practicing making promises and practicing fulfilling those promises, my word, if you want somebody to not believe in promises, make a promise and then don't fulfill it. We have to be fulfilling the promises we made.

We also have to be a people that are preserving the experience of promises being fulfilled, having hope in things that often don't have any proof. I like to say to the young people at times, "Prove to me that your mom loves you. Prove it. Can you look it up?" There's just evidence there. She says she loves me. She does nice things for me when I really stop and think about it. She's doing nice things for me all the time. She actually pretty obviously doesn't always want to be doing them, but she does it anyways. Those are all signs of love.

There is no proof that somebody loves us other than in that evidence that they give, but we're never going to be secure in a relationship unless we believe, the evidence is never going to give us a concrete assuredness that we are loved. If we actually start weighing the evidence it's sort of 50/50 really and when you look at it, right? We have good days and bad days, but the experience of love, the experience of a promise fulfilled is rooted in believing that the person is going to do what they say they're going to do or the person does really feel the way that they feel when they describe it to us.

I often will tell people in confession, you know, recognize here that when you come and tell me things that you've done that you shouldn't have done, I have to believe you. I don't have any proof. I don't ask you to bring evidence. There's great faith practice when we simply share with each other and talk with each other and be who we are and make the promises that we make. And we have to be comfortable with that. We actually have to practice it and defend it. To not be so cynical that we think promises have no weight or to be so doubting that we're always anxious. We don't have any calm until the fulfillment of the promise arrives.

And in this feast today, we have the wonderful event of the conception of St. John being celebrated on a Sunday. I look past into my past homilies I couldn't find anywhere I had spoken about St. John on his conception on a Sunday, and John, as we see in the Epistle reading, which is actually kind of hard to understand because it's about Abraham and Abraham's sons and his sons coming forth from slaves, others from free women, and that being an allegory that being a metaphor for the new Jerusalem that's coming that is not going to be in bondage, but he says in there, we are the people of the promise. We are now, the Christians.

There was a covenant, a law given to Israel that was fulfilled by Christ. Christ was the child of promise, ultimately after the nativity of the Theotokos, after the conception of St. John that we celebrate today, Christ comes, and he is the fulfillment of the promise of the old covenant. And now a new promise has

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been made for us. As St. Paul says, clearly, we are no longer under the bondage of the law of the Old Testament. We are free born, free in Jesus Christ and our faith in him and that is the new promise that is given to us.

And it dawned on me that we have to go back and maybe it's just me, but we have to really go back after these years of being Orthodox and practicing Orthodox principles and reclaiming that joy that we have in the promise of Christ that if we believe in him, we will be saved. Because as Orthodox Christians we can come in, particularly if we have sort of a legalistic path, we can come in to the church and recognize, wow, there's all of these teachings about the church and there's all of these canons that guide the church. And sort of transpose or after we become Orthodox to develop a sort of law orientation again, where there's a lot of rules to keep.

We start looking at the way we celebrate the services, the being on time to a service, say. You ought to be, we ought to do, but not because it's a rule and we're going to be punished if we don't do it. But because we love Christ and we're longing for that fulfillment of the promise that he has given to us and we believe that it's going to happen. It's amazing in the story of the conception of St. John, this wonderful story, we have to put our minds back into that place where at the time of Zachariah being one of the high priests, it was terrifying to go into the Holy of Holies.

It was terrifying. People died there. Many, many rules about what you had to do right and what you could not do wrong, less you'd be struck dead in the presence of God. Deacons going into the Holy of Holies at the wrong time and dying. The high priest going into the Holy of Holies. Imagine me doing this like the deacons is standing out here. I have a rope tied on my leg and when I go into the Holy of Holies, they hang onto that rope because if I'm struck dead, they can't even go in there and get me out. They just have to drag me out by my leg.

It was terrifying. If you pay attention, when the rotation of Zachariah's group comes, a group of priests is their rotation to serve in the temple, he is chosen by lot. That means they threw the dice to see who had to go in. Say there's a dozen priests, it's their rotation, it was by chance that you had to go in, not by choosing and not volunteer. It was a terrifying experience and so he goes in as this trained high priest. He goes into the Holy of Holies and he encounters there the Archangel Gabriel. Very terrifying.

Most often when the angels appeared in those days, they were there to strike you down. Different relationship. We have to always remember this different relationship with God now; free, loving, accepting, not testing. And he sees the Archangel Gabriel there and Gabriel has to tell him again. It always goes along with angels appearing. Don't be afraid if an angel appears to you and you're not afraid, it's probably a demon, that's the rule. When the angel of the God appears, you should be terrified. Not because they're monsters or something because that is the power and the glory that they have. Don't be afraid. They're always saying, don't fear. I'm not here to strike you down.

And the angel Gabriel tells him that this incredible thing is going to happen. He out of the barrenness within his marriage life, Joachim and Anna came in with the conception of the Theotokos, which we celebrated recently to begin the new liturgical year, out of your barrenness out of this strange purity, the strange sort of virginity that is there in your not having kids. We are going to bring forth with the will of God a son. His name is going to be John. That's not your family name. That is God's name for him.

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He is going to be, it doesn't say this in the Gospel, but he is going to be the first great prophet in centuries to appear. You have to remember that as well. It has been hundreds of years since a great prophet arose and he is going to preach the word of God. He is going to lay the way for the Messiah to come. He is going to lay the way for the promise of God to be fulfilled because the people of Israel had been waiting for centuries with not much word from God wondering if this covenant is going to be fulfilled. This old promise that was made.

And I love, you know me, I love that Zachariah is still this befuddled, fallen human being in the midst of the Archangel Gabriel. Gets this long declaration from God as to why this is happening and the promise that it's going to be in the wonder that it's going to be. And he Googled it and he found on Wikipedia that when you're past a certain age, particularly your wife, you can't have kids. So, he turned to Gabriel and said to him with the degree of certainty, "How's this going to happen? I'm an old man and my wife has past childbearing years" and if you watch Christ, Christ does the same thing.

Gabriel is imitating the Trinity. He doesn't answer his question. It doesn't provide for him any proof. He doesn't find a better article on Wikipedia. He looks him in the face. I love this line. He looks him in the face, and he says, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and do what he tells me to do and I have been sent to you." That word is apostle. "I'm an apostle to you and I am to give you the news, the information, (that word is to be evangelize) "I am an apostle sent to you by God to evangelize you, to convert you to a new faith and a new understanding and God and because you are still resistant, even though I am standing here glowing with uncreated light, like whatever you need to know. I've got a spear but I'm not going to strike you down. I'm seven feet tall. I speak with the authority of the Trinity. We're just going to strike you down for a while, because what came out of your mouth was not cooperative. It was doubt. It wasn't faith. You said to me, "Well, you're making this promise my wife will -" He's already questioning it. What's the proof? How's it going to happen? It's biologically impossible, but he doesn't even answer him.

He said, 'I have been sent here. I have the authority. You are going to submit to this because God has chosen you and you'll see in your dumbness your lack of being able to speak, that what's coming out of your mouth is doubt. It's not faith. The promise was made to you and somewhere along the line you stopped believing it' - and we know the rest of the story. He, he goes, and he serves. He cannot speak at all until the child is born and his wife says that the name of the child will be John.

This is a breaking of family tradition at the time, a great cultural abnormality. And he writes on a piece of paper, 'his name will be John', his name is John, and then he is freed. And from his mouth we will see at the birth of St. John. The first thing to come out of his mouth. After that experience is prophecy. He prophesied about what his own son will do, and he says in that prophecy, because this is the fulfillment of the promise that God made to the people of Israel. We are the people, St. Paul says in Galatians, as we read this morning, we are the children of the promise and that needs to go back into our hearts again where we realize, "Well, I'm always going to be struggling because I live in a fallen world." Nowhere in the teaching of the church does it say you ought to be surprised when you fall.

It says, get up, get up, get up if you fall again, get up again. If you fall three times, get up three times. Are you a person who gets up, who perseveres, who struggles, who keeps the faith? Who believes the promise? Although we don't know the promise will be fulfilled until it's fulfilled or are, we one of doubts? But if we are a person of doubt, look inside yourself and find the little faith that is there and

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grow it. Fan it back to life, feed it, fertilize it, water it, and start experiencing once again that Christ loves you the way that you are.

We have great, incredible, impossible ideals that we are striving for. You all know that, right? We're all striving for holiness, probably not going to happen. I remember being very disappointed listening to father Thomas Hopko in person speak one time and saying, "You know, there's no one in this room that is going to be a Saint," and I remember that really bothered me probably because at the time I was planning on being one or something it really bothered me, but the odds are that is true, but we don't care. We are striving for that ideal anyways.

We're going to move towards sanctity to the best ability that we can. We're not going to pretend that sanctity isn't there just because we're most likely not going to achieve it personally. I am striving for my own purification. I am striving for my salvation, but beyond that is sanctification, is purity. We may never any of us in this room be a saint in this life, but I make you a promise. If you follow Christ and you make it into heaven, you'll be a saint there.

There is no imperfection in heaven. There is no folly or broken self-will in the presence of God. And by his grace and by his promise that he is made to us, that if we believe in him and we pick up our cross denying ourselves, and we follow after him, we will be in his presence with him forever. There's no proof for it, but we have to believe it anyways, and the proof that starts appearing is that when we live according to that unproven promise, we start experiencing God's work in our life. And the more that he works and the more obviously he works in our life, the more it goes from being coincidental to beyond probability that when I live a certain way, I am blessed. I have love in my heart, I forgive, I'm happy, I'm satisfied. When I live a different way, I get everything that I want. I get my will all the time and I'm totally unhappy. I hate myself. I hate the people around me. So experiment with the promise because it cannot be proven upfront. That is the power of faith, but in time having embraced it, you will be certain that it is true and that it is going to be fulfilled in your life, in relationship with God.

And that by the grace of God, someday by his mercy alone and his love for us, we will be standing there in the midst of his presence with the Archangel Gabriel, with Zachariah, with John. And when that time comes, remembering that Gabriel said, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God." We will look at ourselves by his love and his mercy and say, "I too am here standing in the presence of God."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.