

Title: Christmas, Promises Kept and Promises Made  
Text: Genesis 2.16-17; Matthew 1.18-25  
Theme: God finishes what he starts  
Occasion: Christmas Sunday, 2014  
Prop Stmt. Christmas is the result of God keeping his promise.

Read Texts:

Kim Gannon was the guy who wrote the words to the song, "I'll Be Home for Christmas." But he could not get anyone in the music business to do anything with it since they said the song was too sad for people who were separated from their families because of W.W.II. But one day, Gannon was playing golf with Bing Crosby and sang it for him. Bing Crosby recorded the song, and within a month it was one of the top-playing songs in the country, and stayed that way for eleven weeks. It not only went gold, but it has been recorded by at least 137 other artists.

The original song is actually very, very simple. It only has 8 short lines that are repeated. But for the last 70 years that song has been synonymous with Christmas and remains as one of the most popular Christmas songs of all time, why? The essence of the song is a promise. The promise is a personal expression of desire. I want to be home. I want to be with my family. I want to be in a familiar place with the people who love me. And I want you to be comforted in knowing in that I am alright and that I will be home. But, the song ends with a concession. I will be home, but it may only be in my dreams. It is sad, isn't it? In fact, the BBC thought that it was so sad that they banned the song from being broadcast. But for most, dreams are better than reality.

The movie, *Shadowlands*, is the story of C.S. Lewis and his late-in-life marriage to Joy Davidman. In the one of the opening scenes, Lewis, who is a professor at Oxford is sitting in the midst of several of his students and he references a piece of poetry that speaks of the image of a perfect rosebud. Lewis asks the students what the rosebud represents. One of the students says, "Love?"

"What kind of love?" Lewis responds a bit impatiently.

"Untouched," one says.

"Unopened, like a bud?" suggest another.

"Yes, more?" Lewis prods.

"Perfect love." Another student says.

"What makes it perfect?" Lewis says, "Come on, wake up."

Is it that courtly ideal of love? Okay, what is that, though? What is the courtly ideal's one essential quality?"

The students are quiet. So Lewis answers his own question. "Unattainability. The most intense joy lies not in the having but in the desiring. The delight that never fades. Bliss that is eternal is only yours when what you most desire is just out of reach."

What makes the desire to be home for Christmas so powerful? Is it not the imagination of a perfect Christmas with friends, music, food, decorations, presents and laughter? That image is powerful, if not unattainable, isn't it? First of all, someone usually gets sick,

right? Then someone in the family is fighting with someone else and refuses to come and makes a bit stink about it, or somebody gets drunk and things get really messy. Reality is not like the Christmas cards is it? That is why Lewis says that the most intense joy lies not in the having but in the desiring because when you actually have what you desire, what you have will never measure up to what you actually desired.

Wow! That sure is a depressing way to begin a Christmas sermon, isn't it? But, wait a minute. Is that really true? Is it really true that the most intense joy lies not in the having but in the desiring? No, not always. When is that not true? It is not true when our imagination-fueled desire is not large enough to comprehend the reality. For example, let's say that you are going to take your 4-year old son on a vacation to the Grand Canyon. He has never seen the Grand Canyon and does not possess the capacity to imagine it without actually seeing it. When you tell him that you are going to visit the Grand Canyon, he is not really sure what that means. He tries to imagine what you are talking about. What he imagines is wonderful and grand, but it is a 4-year old wonderful and a 4-year old grand. When he actually sees the Grand Canyon it is larger than he ever dreamed it would be. In fact, it is so expansive and massive that as a 4-year old, he cannot really grasp it, but later in life when he returns he can then begin to appreciate how grand it truly is. In that case, the most intense joy is not in the desiring but in the having, because in the having, you realize that what you desired was too small.

Questions regarding the Jews

### **1. What was the desire of God's people?**

They wanted a hero who would rescue them from their circumstances. Many of them suffered under the oppression of the Romans. Taxes were high and life was not fair for the little guy. People were vulnerable to disease and weather. The average person lived meagerly. We would say, from paycheck to paycheck, though they were more of an agricultural society and life was so dependent on the weather. When Jesus would heal people, they would obviously come to him and pour out of the villages and towns, like a stampede, at times by the thousands. They were desperate for help. They wanted to live. They wanted to be healthy. They wanted to eat. They wanted to be safe. They wanted to be free. When we read about the kind of kings they had and the kind of religious leaders they had and the kind of oppression they faced from the Romans, we feel pity for them. We can identify with that.

We want our families to be fed, protected, happy and secure. We want good things for them and for us. We look for leaders who will somehow cause these things to happen. We look to political leaders to solve problems, to military leaders to protect our borders, to police officers to keep us safe, to doctors to keep us healthy, to educators to train us to get a job and to CEO's to keep our jobs.

Immediate desires often crowd out and minimize ultimate needs. In fact, our tendency as humans is obvious. If our immediate desires appear to be met, then we tend to be oblivious to our ultimate needs. There are always some who think deeper and ask harder

questions, but most people tend to live in the moment. So, what was the desire of God's people? Well, it wasn't God. It was them.

## **2. What was the problem with that?**

They dreamed too small. They dreamed of a leader who would save them from slavery and oppression like Moses, or from their enemies like David. But Jesus came to save his people from their sins. The problem with that is that they wanted a leader who would save them from the consequences of sin but they did not care for a leader who wanted to save them from sin itself.

This past year, the car industry has been affected by some high profile recalls. Imagine that you were responsible for the entire assembly of a pick-up truck and you knew that it had a problem, but you did not want the headache of going back through the chain of events and suppliers and engineers and materials to identify the actual cause of the problem. That would take too much work and you would have to address the people who did not do their job properly and that would be uncomfortable, because they would be embarrassed and some of them were your friends, so you didn't do anything about it but instead, you wanted corporate to keep issuing recalls to keep patching the problem that you were causing. Addressing the consequences is pointless if you keep building flawed vehicles.

The problem with the desires of God's people was that they dreamed too small. They only wanted someone to fix their world, when God came to fix them. And to make matters worse, most of them refused to let go of their puny dream. In Matthew 7, Jesus says that life is more than food and the body is more than clothing. Think of what Jesus is saying here. Life is more, so much more than existing, surviving and just making it. How are you doing? And some people say, "Well, I'm surviving. Or "I'm making it." And I want to say, "dream bigger." There's more, so much more than just existing and surviving. Your dream is too small. You want too little. You are lusting for plastic.

What if, when you promised your 4-year old boy that you were going to take him to the Grand Canyon, that you had him draw a picture of what he imagined it would be. Without ever seeing it, his idea was not very grand, but he drew what he imagined. Every day he looked at his drawing and dreamt about what it would be like to actually see it. However, when you arrived at the Grand Canyon National Park, your son refused to get out of the van because he just wanted to sit in his seat and look at his picture. He had no interest in seeing the real thing because he just wanted to look at his picture. His dream is too small. In fact, he does not even have the capacity to dream as big as reality. This is the two-fold problem that Jesus faced. His people wanted deliverance from immediate problems and not from the ultimate cause. They dreamed too small. They either failed to see or they refused to see the connection between their sin as the ultimate cause and their circumstances as the immediate consequences of sin.

But, how do you get someone to see that? How do you get someone to seek that? How do you get someone to grasp their true need and to realize that their dream is too small? If

your son doesn't want to get out of his car seat, you can carry the car seat to the Observation Deck – right? You show them the real thing! And that is what God did.

### **3. What did God provide?**

God provided a Savior who will save his people from their sins. God provided a Savior who would save beyond their imagination because we are incapable of realizing how deep our need is because we do not grasp how offensive our sin is and how high our debt is. God provided a Savior who would not follow the people and give them what they demanded or what they thought they needed. God gave them a Savior who would save them from their real need. He would save them from their sin. That is why he was to be named Jesus. Jesus means Savior. The question is, would they put down their pencil sketch of what they imagined him to be and see the real thing, or would they refuse to give up their puny dream?

Questions for you

### **4. What do you want from God?**

What do you want that you have been denied from having? What do you want that has been taken away from you? What do you want that you fear that you will lose? Some of you have been denied from having children, or grandchildren, or a steady job, or a spouse who respects you, or even having a spouse. Your children are not close. Your siblings do not care about you and when you just think on that, it is very depressing. This is not the most wonderful time of the year for you because you are assaulted with all of these images of what life is supposed to be. Every jewelry commercial features a couple who are madly in love. No one seems to love you like that. Every cologne commercial features an exotic goddess and you don't look like that. Family movies show just that: families and togetherness, belonging and a home, but your family or home doesn't look like that.

Others of you had some of those things and they are now gone. You look back with fondness but it stands in bitter and stark relief to your current condition. While others fear that the relationship you have, you are going to lose, or the job you have you are going to lose, or the health that you have, you are going to lose. What do you want from God? You want someone who will love you and protect you and want you. You want to be respected and admired. You want to be successful and secure. You want to be pain-free and disease-free and symptom-free. And your prayer seems simple. God, can't you just give me that? Why wouldn't you give me that? You say that you love me. You say that you are my Father. Well, if you are really a Father to me, and my own Father would give me what I need, why don't you? It doesn't seem too much to ask.

### **5. Is there a problem with that?**

Yes, there is. The problem is, I have drawn a sketch of what I think life should be like for me. I have this image of what would make me happy and I love to go there in my mind

and live in that world and pretend that this is what my life is or is going to be. And it doesn't seem to matter how unrealistic it may be. For example, you may have dated some real jerks but you are convinced that there is a perfect person out there who will never let you down. Or, you heard of someone being miraculously healed and so you hold out hope that this will happen to you in spite of the fact that day after day after day, the reality of your condition does not change. You too have drawn a sketch of what you think like should be like for you and the gap between where you are right now, and where you wish your life was, is the anger gap, or the bitterness gap, or the depression gap. The problem is, you fail to understand what the real problem is.

What is the real problem? The real problem is not that I experience loneliness, loss, disappointment, poor health symptoms and rejection. All of these are themselves symptoms. They are symptoms of what? They are symptoms of living in a world that is cursed by sin. Do you see the danger that we tend to place ourselves in? We are tempted to think that it is God's job to address the symptoms of sin. In fact, we are tempted to be satisfied if God would simply address the symptoms of sin, but not the sin itself. Our dream is too small. Sure we lust for things and long for things and covet things that can rule our affections, but the solution to that is not to lust less because the problem is that we do not desire enough. We are far too easily satisfied with food and clothing and respect when God offers us an eternal trip that will blow away every pencil sketch imagination that we have ever conjured up. So, when I am tempted to be discouraged over present realities, what do I need to think on? There are two fundamental things.

## **6. What has God provided and what will God provide?**

What did God provide? God provided a Savior who will save his people from their sins because that is our biggest need. Our rebellion before God, our failure to love him and worship him and obey him and trust him has made us infinitely guilty and eternally liable for punishment. He is holy beyond comprehension. He is powerful beyond imagination. He is beautiful beyond compare and he is righteous beyond every pure ideal that we can consider. Therefore his justice and his wrath against sin is a terror that we could never appreciate. Instead of letting us face that, God sent Christ. God sent us a Savior. He sent us the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Godhead who added to his divine nature a human nature and became the God-man. He became the God-man, forever, that you a human, might be able to live with God, forever. He came to us in order to do what Adam failed to do, and what Noah failed to do and what Abraham, Moses, David and every person who ever walked on this earth failed to do and has failed to do. He came to live an infinitely perfect life. And he did. Then he offered up that perfectly pure life in your place when he laid down his life as a sacrifice for your sin. In his death, he absorbed the infinitely righteous wrath of his Father, that you might receive the infinite grace of God and be forgiven and declared righteous in his sight. This forgiveness and righteousness is yours through faith alone in Christ alone. That is our biggest need.

Before Christ ascended back into heaven, he gave his disciples instructions. He did not tell them to go into the world and heal everybody or feed everybody or make sure everybody had successful jobs with plenty of money. He told them to preach the gospel

because the good news of what Christ accomplished addresses not only our greatest need, but it addresses the cause of all of the other problems.

What did Christ God provide? In his first coming, Christ provided the solution to our sin. Having dealt with its cause, he has the right to deal with the symptoms. Already, we have forgiveness of our sin through faith in the death of Christ. Already we are declared righteous by faith through the life of Christ. Already we have eternal life by faith in the resurrection of Christ. Already we are in his kingdom through the ascension of Christ. But, not yet are we experiencing a world, a body, or a community that is free from all of the consequences of sin. Not yet, but someday. What will God provide? Some day, the first heaven and first earth will pass away and the sea will be no more. Someday the shadows will be gone and the curtain will rise on the full reality. One day the holy city, the New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. One day God will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. One day he will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. The symptoms will be gone because the very problem itself will be removed. Beloved, here is the one desire that will never remain a disappointment. God's provision of a Savior is so that you could be part of his perfect kingdom.

C.S. Lewis wrote the Chronicles of Narnia. And in the very last paragraph of the last book he writes about a reality that dwarfs our imagination. In it he speaks of the kind of hope that we, as believers, live with. He writes, "And as Aslan spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

I close with the words of John from Revelation 22. *"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of the lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."* And why do we reign forever and ever? It is because the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And he shall reign forever and ever. And by faith in Christ we are made his and placed into Christ. His kingdom because our kingdom. And his reign is our eternal joy. And that is a promise you can dream about knowing that you can never dream that big!