

SERMON TITLE- "The Promise"

TEXT- 2 Peter 3

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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This year we began a series entitled, "Letters From A Friend." These letters were from Peter, the apostle. They were written as encouragements to the churches of Asia Minor- churches that were facing struggles.

No matter which side of the equation you are on- having a friend facing trials- or facing trials yourself- it is a tough place to be. Trials happen in life and sometimes they come in waves that make us wonder what is going on.

Last year we were on a surfing beach with giant waves- so naturally we jumped into the water to try our hand at body surfing in them. I remember having a great time except when a particularly powerful wave gave me a good tumble. "So this is what a rag doll in a washing machine must feel like," went through my mind. What made it worse was- that having been churned about- just as I felt the urgent need to get to the surface and get some air- the next wave rolled over me and started the whole churning process again. "I guess I don't need air as much as I thought? In any case I am not getting any at the moment- so we will find out how long this can go on for." It was an interesting experience- to say the least.

But that is what life sometimes feels like and whether you are being tossed by the waves or you are watching someone you love being tossed about by the surf- it can be tough.

But that is the context of Peter's letters. Peter's signature phrase in both letters is- "Dear friends . . ." Other translations use "beloved". That is probably a better translation since the root word here is agape- but we don't usually go around calling each other "beloved."

"Dear friends" expresses it very well. These are people Peter cares deeply about and as, from a distance, he watches them being tumbled by the waves, he writes, pouring out his care and love for them.

That is what we have been reading and I hope the encouragement and instruction that he has sent- has filled your hearts in the past months.

And today we close off with Peter's last words. Nothing else he has ever written survives so, whether he intended it this way or not, these are his closing comments.

Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles. 2 Peter 3:1-2

#1. Remember The Promise

In a very brief manner, Peter summarizes his whole purpose in writing. God loves us and to a broken world has sent the message of The Good News. It began in the beginning, was spoken by the prophets, was delivered by Jesus and is being explained by the apostles.

And what is the Good News? God will set things right. To a world full of pain, suffering, sadness and brokenness the message of healing and restoration has gone out.

And Peter's message to these churches who were going through pain of their own- was- if we are the people who are supposed to live under that new promise- let's make sure we actually reflect that ideal.

But Peter is also writing to people who do know that everything is not OK at the moment. In fact he has explained why- even for people of the promise- life can be very hard. Understanding this is supposed to help us do right.

When we go to the dentist and feel the pain of his work- we endure it and don't jerk away- because we know that this pain is caused by our rotten teeth and that the dentist is trying to set a remedy in place. If we didn't know this we would not sit there in the dentist chair and submit ourselves to the pain.

Remember the promise- Peter tells us- it will "stimulate you to wholesome thinking."

But then he closes off with a couple of points that follow from this-

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died,

everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." 2 Peter 3:3-4

#2. The Wait Causes Problems

As humans we are not very good with deferred gratification. I remember the days, when as a child, we anticipated Christmas presents. Our parents had to go to a great deal of effort to keep the presents a secret. The presents were coming, and we even knew that to some degree, discovering what they were, too soon, would diminish the joy of the "present giving day" but still we were driven to try to find out what they would be. We did not wait well.

But even worse- there are those who in the waiting period become cynical. Maybe there is no present to be waited for. Maybe this promise is just a technique to keep people waiting happily.

Karl Marx may have come up with the phrase, "Religion is the opiate of the people" but it is an ancient idea and it was there in the churches Peter was addressing and even then it had been around for 1000s of years. This is the kind of thinking that takes the promise and turns the wait into something negative.

For Peter, this fact is so important that he closes off his last communication to the church with this very strong, highlighted point- "you must understand"! People will scoff at the promise.

Why? This is something of a human mystery- but while we may not understand it- we can observe it in ourselves and in the people around us.

Peter doesn't explain it directly- but he does make a note on this twisting of a good promise into something bad that he does want us to hear.

. . . they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. 2 Peter 3:5-7

#3. Be Aware- Understand Self Delusion

I have talked about my atheist blog experience several times in the last months. One of the things that impacted me about that dialogue was how insolent people can be about God. I understand and can appreciate those who have questions etc- but I don't "understand" insolence about things eternal. Some day we will die and we will face the question of God directly- one way or another. This is not theoretical. The insolence of young people who have the delusion of immortality astonished me again.

What is Peter saying here? "Don't be surprised by it." That insolence is part of the human condition. We know we are going to die some day. We know that the world and everything we see is temporary. Those who have any sense of ultimate justice also know that there will be a time of accounting. True atheists of course don't believe this. Justice is just a comforting thought like religion- that changes with the times.

But there are very few true atheists and most who walk that road still believe in justice in an ultimate sense. Many of them hold to the karma principle- what goes around comes around. You can't do evil and get away with it- forever. You will pay!

The flip side of this is that those who do right will be rewarded- and in the Bible the reward is The Promise.

It may be complicated but those who cynically dismiss God's promise- Peter tells us- are "deliberately" forgetting their inborn knowledge of ultimate justice.

Be aware, Peter, reminds us- that we do not live for the values of this world, which is corrupted and reserved for extinction. Remember that we live under the principles of the Promise.

And make sure you understand as well that this is not just a problem that angry atheists have. We all fall almost instantly into the pattern of thinking that is governed by the moment rather than governed by an eternal Kingdom.

And what helps us remember this- when life just keeps rolling on and seasons follows seasons, and those who are trying so hard don't appear to be getting the advantages we know they deserve?

Peter, as he closes off his last letter, gives us 2 answers to the question of why it takes so long to get the Promise-

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness . . . 2 Peter 3:8

#4. God's Timeline Is Different From Ours

That is a pretty obvious statement- but it really matters. God is the God of eternity. He created everything- including time. We are time-based creatures. Everything we do is measured in units of time- minutes, hours, days, months, years, centuries, millenniums etc.

God deals with us in this time based creation of ours- but the Bible describes God as beyond time. And Peter explains it carefully- don't ever forget this fact. It is hard to understand. When God addresses us He does use concepts of days, weeks and years- but when it come to His ultimate Promise- we must "not forget this one thing".

"The Lord is not slow, as some understand slowness . . ."

And again, Peter adds, "dear friends." This is a hard concept and you are given it with the knowledge that it puts those who believe it into a spot that leaves them open to attack- however it is a core, closing belief. We may not understand it- but it is important.

But this leads to another important aspect of who God is that follows from the later and it is linked by the phrase "as some understand slowness."

One aspect of that is the simple limit of the finite human mind when it comes up against an infinite God. Against that all we can do is remain humble and teachable. This is an interesting little bit of Biblical knowledge and anyone can understand it- but with it we can grasp what Einstein spent his whole life trying to figure out. And if we are wise we won't try get too smart with this knowledge. It should be enough to answer the question of the simple person and vast enough to keep the genius humble. It is a cure for insolence.

But there is another side of this that is very understandable- and we need to understand it. Why is there a delay? This too can be understood by the youngest child and the greatest genius-

. . . The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you,

not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9

#5. The Delay Is Because God Is Patient and Loving

Why does God not bring closure to this whole complicated human business and just set everything right? Because when that happens the dues will have to be paid- and we are in the period of grace- and as long as we are in this period of grace there is an opportunity for people to respond by repentance.

It is not hard to understand how this principle works. You are speeding down the road and pass one of the speed indicator lights. You are going too fast. The policeman standing there watches you. Why doesn't the policeman jump in his car and chase you down? Is it because he can't? No, he can do that- but in this case he has chosen to let the speeders know how fast they are going so that they can smarten up.

Only a foolish person would ignore the information or worse give the policemen a gesture of defiance.

And so it is with God, Peter explains. Don't confuse the fact that God is letting the world go without, closing things off, with the fact that He doesn't care or can't do anything. Not only is God's timing different from ours- He is demonstrating His for us by the fact that the end is not here.

This is a very important piece of information.

Today is Palm Sunday. I hope some of you came to Church today and as I opened up to 2 Peter were wondering why I was not talking about this day. This is an important date on the Christian calendar. It is the Sunday before Easter and you really can't understand Easter until you understand Palm Sunday.

What Is The Significance Of Palm Sunday?

#1. It Was The Announcement That The Promise Had Arrived

Nearly 2000 years ago, after 3 years of careful teaching and preaching about God's Promise, after gathering and training a band of followers, Jesus has turned His attention to Jerusalem. This is the heart of the Israelite community. He heads into the heart of the city. He has been preaching that the Kingdom of God is at hand- now He comes into the city as King.

As He approaches the people of the city recognize what is going on. They have been told about the Promise by the

prophets, they have heard Jesus preaching and teaching, they have been waiting for this moment and now it is here.

They gather up palm branches [hence Palm Sunday] and in the custom of the day- spread them out and wave them in the air as a spontaneous celebration. The King, the Promise has arrived.

The God of eternity was now at the doorstep- here in time and space- with the package. The God of infinity is walking the real earth in real time. No longer was it a promise- now the choice before the people was- what are we going to do when confronted with this option. That is what Palm Sunday is all about.

It is like the child at Christmas time finally getting the gift that he had been anticipating.

But what happens next? Of course, they will tear off the wrapper and look inside- right?

If we just use the picture of children and Christmas, however, we could miss the point. What child doesn't immediately open the gift? We know something went wrong.

So let's shift gears just a little. We all get offers of gifts, probably almost daily. They are the offers of scam artists just waiting for us to take the bait of some fantastic offer. We don't open those gifts because we, rightly, don't trust the offer.

And for some reason, instead of opening the gift- the Gift was rejected.

#2. The Promise Was Spurned

We will explore this and its significance more deeply next week- but that is what happened. It is a critically important part of the story.

But for today, Peter reminds of again of something very important-

#3. The Promise Still Stands

Again, a big part of what that means will be explore further next week. God did give His gift to the world 2000 years ago. The rejection that happened has consequences- but we are the people of the Promise and Peter wants to make sure that as he closes off his letters to his friends they are orienting themselves by that fact.

The lesson of Palm Sunday is that we are to be ready for the time when like, the people of Jerusalem 2000 years ago- we

will see the full package in real time and we are to live in anticipation of this.

And so Peter signs off-

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him . . .

Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard . . . To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. 2 Peter 3:14-18