

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Christmas Day
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
God keeps his promises.

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those under the law, so that we would be adopted as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts to shout, “Abba, Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son. And if you are a son, then you are also an heir of God through Christ.

—Galatians 4:4-7

How many times have you been disappointed by broken promises? How many times have you disappointed others by broken promises? You and I make promises regularly, sometimes without even thinking through them, don't we? And, let the truth be told, there are times when we do not make good on those promises, right?

Why is it that people can make promises so easily and so quickly, but just as easily and just as quickly they can break them? I'm sure there are several different reasons. Maybe we forget. It's easy to forget about a promise that we made. Sometimes parents make a promise to a child just to stop him from continuously asking. The parent may forget, but the child won't.

Maybe some people break promises because the circumstances have changed. Most of the time, a promise deals with things in the future, and, well, we know how quickly circumstances in the future can change. Dad promises to take the children to the park, but then he gets an unexpected phone call from the boss asking him to come into work. The circumstances surrounding that promise have changed, and dad has to break his promise.

Maybe we break our promises because they were too hard to keep. It was too much work, and you weren't ready to put the effort and the work into keeping the promise. I think a lot of people break their marriage promises because they don't want to work for their marriage. They aren't willing to go through the pain and hardship of making their relationship flourish, so they break their marriage promises.

We live in a world of broken promises. From politicians to parents, from friends to family, we see broken promises all around us. People make promises regularly, and for whatever reason, there are times when they do not make good on their promises.

What if that's how it was with God? God has made some incredible promises, hasn't he? What if his promises were just empty? What if his promises were just cheap talk? What if he didn't make good on his promises? I'm sure you have considered this, but do you realize how much we depend on God for promises he has made and the only thing that we have to go on with those promises is what we find in ink on a page?

Just think about some of these promises that God has written down in his Bible. “You are my son or daughter. I have made you a part of my family. Your home is with me in heaven. Through your baptism and the promises that I have connected to that water, I have made you holy in my sight. You are the heir of everything that is mine, and, of course, since everything is mine, everything is yours. I promise that everything will work out for your eternal good. I am with you always to the very end of the age.”

We could go on and on with incredible promises that God has made to you. Just take one of them. God has said you are his heir. But have you ever wondered, “If I am an heir of everything that is God's, why am I struggling so much to pay for the bills? If God has given us peace, like he promises, then why am I so restless? Why am I so stressed out?” Are his promises just empty words?

God's promises are written in the book we call “The Bible.” But we haven't seen the full manifestation of him making good on all those promises. Oh, the full manifestation of his promises will, of course, come when we are taken to heaven. The full manifestation of those promises will come when Jesus comes back on the Last Day.

But once again, those are words, aren't they? It's easy to say. God is going to take us to heaven. But how do we know it's really going to happen that way? How do we even know there is a heaven? I mean, sure God has promised it. But I haven't met anybody personally who has seen heaven and can verify that it's real.

And the truth is that some of us in this church are going to leave this earth in the year 2024, maybe even in 2023. Some of us are going to die. How can you trust in God to keep his promises and make good on his promises, especially when we find it so difficult to keep our promises?

Well, my friends, this is not blind faith. It never has been. It never will be. You and I can be most confident in our God that he *always* keeps his promises. And what we are celebrating today gives us that confidence.

The apostle Paul's words in Galatians 4 are words that we can go to again and again to remind ourselves that God always keeps his promises. The apostle Paul says, "**But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son...**" And right there is evidence of a God who keeps his promises.

Ever since Adam and Eve messed up their own lives and the lives of all people, God made a promise: I'm going to send a Savior for you. I'm going to send someone who will crush Satan's head. Adam and Eve lived some 4,000 years before Jesus came to this earth. But God promised that he would come.

And again and again throughout the Old Testament pages, he reiterated the same promise. "A Messiah, a Savior, is coming." You may remember the promise that was given to Abraham. Abraham was a man who was 99 years old and childless, whose wife was way past the age of bearing children. And God came to Abraham and gave him a promise. "**You will be the father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant, [my promise,] as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you**" (Genesis 17).

God had promised to Abraham that through his descendants a Savior would come. Abraham lived around 2,000 years before Jesus came to this earth. And you can see again and again in ink the promises of God. God promised King David that he would build an eternal family from his line. A King would come from descendants who would be an eternal Ruler. David lived 1,000 years before Jesus came.

The prophet Micah foretold in Micah 5:2, "**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel. His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.**" Micah lived 700 years before Jesus came.

But look at what we are celebrating today. "**When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son...**" He kept his promise! He promised that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. He promised that he would have to flee to Egypt. He promised that the Savior would grow up in Nazareth. And so, **when the set time had fully come**, when there was a virgin who was pledged to be married, who was living in Nazareth, she became pregnant. Not by Joseph. But by a miracle of God.

And **when the set time had fully come**, when Caesar Augustus made a law that everybody needed to return to their homeland so that a proper census could be taken, this family of a man and a pregnant virgin traveled to Bethlehem.

And **when the set time had fully come**, when a ruler by the name of Herod set out to kill every boy under the age of 2, this family of a man, a woman, and a child traveled down to Egypt to flee from the pending death threat.

And **when the set time had fully come**, when Herod had died, this family then moved from Egypt to Nazareth, the place where Jesus would grow up. God kept every single promise, even the most minute details of those promises.

Oh, we could spend the entire day talking about these Old Testament promises, couldn't we? There are hundreds of promises that God made in the Old Testament that pointed to Jesus, that pointed to what we are celebrating today. God sent his Son. I mean, God promised through the prophet Isaiah that this Savior would be pierced for our transgressions. And look at who is the military force at the time of Jesus. The Romans, the government that had a brutal, powerful form of capital punishment called crucifixion. That little baby who is born in a manger would grow up to be pierced, not for his own crimes, but he would have his hands, feet, head, and side pierced for our sins.

"**When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son.**" God keeps his promises. He kept his promise that a Savior would come to redeem, to ransom, to save us from sin, death, the devil, and hell. He kept his promise in the exact way we needed him to keep that promise. **God sent his Son to be born of a woman.** This wasn't some hidden mission. He promised Adam and Eve all the way back in the Garden of Eden that someone would come from the offspring of the woman. And so, God made good on his promise. God sent his Son. He entered our planet the same way you and I did... through the agonizing trauma of the natural birth process, minus the epidural, of course. And he came into this world through a woman, a poor woman, and in a dark barn. That's how he came to save you.

And not only that. **God sent his Son born under the law.** Why did he have to do *that*? Because that's how you and I are. There are certain laws that you and I live under. There are the laws of the government. We have to keep those, don't we? If you speed coming out of Saguaro National Park, you will have to pay a hefty ticket. We have laws of the government that we need to keep, and at times we have broken.

Well, Jesus was born under Caesar's law, and he kept that law perfectly as a good citizen because of the times when we haven't. He was born under all God's Old Testament laws, all the laws that dictated how a person was to worship. He kept those laws perfectly once and for all. But he was also placed under God's moral law, his timeless laws of human behavior. We summarize them with the 10 Commandments. And Jesus kept *all* those laws perfectly as well so that he could bring pardon to the human race who has broken them thousands and thousands of times.

And what is the result? **You are all sons of God, heirs of eternal life.** You are not slaves to your sin. It does not own you. It doesn't hang over your head. Many times that's what sin does, doesn't it? If you receive a speeding ticket, it just looms over head, and you feel so miserable because of it. If you hurt another person, you can carry that guilt with you everywhere you go. But the result of Jesus keeping God's laws perfectly in your place is that you are not slaves to those sins anymore. They do not own you. They are gone, no longer your sins! Jesus took them away from you.

And because of that, you belong to God, not as his slave where he tells you to do something and you simply respond, "Yes, sir." No, he makes you a part of his family, but not just any part of his family. You are a part of his family that receives his full inheritance. Really? Has he really done that for us? Can a sinful fool like me really be a holy heir of God? Yes, because that's what God promises. And as we can see from the pages of history and from the pages of Scripture, not only has God written those promises with the ink of a pen, he has fulfilled those promises in his Son Jesus. Right there, as you see a baby born in a manger, a baby who grows up to die on a cross, right there is where you can see the most vivid and clear display that God keeps his promises.

So, what does that mean for you? Well, it means a lot of things, but let me just give you one example. When you are feeling down in the dumps, when life just has you dragging, feeling lonely and guilty, God has given you a promise. He has not promised that he will take all your hardships and struggles away. Not yet. No, he hasn't promised that until you go home to heaven. But while you struggle, he has given you an incredible promise. You can go to your Father in heaven as a little child confidently goes to his loving Daddy. You can talk to him. You can pray to him. And he will be there for you. He will once again speak to you through his Word. He will strengthen you. He will equip you. Because as you face whatever challenges you may face, you will never face them alone. How do I know that? Because God has promised, and God always keeps his promises. That is good news of great joy! Amen.