

January 28, 2007
Promise Keepers
Acts 18:18-23

I understand that Disney World is offering a free night in Cinderella's castle. Apparently, unsuspecting guests are selected at random near the end of each day to spend a night in this enchanting mansion. One of the dear ladies in our church office told me that she was hoping that she and her husband would be one of the lucky few. I asked her, "Would you really like to spend a night in Cinderella's castle?" She replied, "Of course, but I don't want to see beyond the magic."

What an intriguing response. My fellow co-worker didn't want to see the wires and electronics and duct work and special effects behind the imaginary world of Cinderella. She wanted to live in the world of dreams, a world of the imagination. Don't we all.

I wonder when the apostle Paul saw "behind the magic." On the road to Damascus when he encountered the living Christ, his entire world changed. Chosen by God he must have felt an incredible high. Without a doubt he was on a mountaintop. Have you ever thought how long it took before Paul came back to earth? How long before Paul realized that doing God's work was not so glorious after all? I wonder how often Paul thought about throwing in the towel?

Sooner or later every Christian sees "beyond the magic." I don't mean to imply that there is any magic involved in Christian faith; but I do believe there is a time when we are faced with the harsh reality of how hard it is to live this life of faith. From those heart stopping moments when we feel spiritually high to those tedious times when God feels a million miles away, we become acutely aware that the Christian life has not given us a free pass to circumvent the cruelties of life. On more days than not we don't feel much of anything except fatigue and frustration and the common ordinary pains that everyone else in the world experiences. There is not much glory attending deacon meetings or teaching a third grade class of boys or volunteering to work in the kitchen or any number of things in a church. Yes, there are those wonderful spiritual highs when we feel so close to God, but they don't last very long and soon our bodies are tired and drained of energy. Why can't we always stay on those spiritual highs? I think Paul must have asked the same question maybe a few thousand times in his life.

On the Mt. of Transfiguration the disciples were awed by the sight of Moses and Elijah with Jesus. The Bible tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them. They caught a glimpse of who Jesus really was in all his glory and splendor. It must have been a magnificent moment. The disciples wanted to stay there on that mountain top and savor the moment. I don't blame them. I would want to do the same thing. But Jesus commanded them that they should leave the mountain and go back down into the valley, down to where people were, down to disease and sickness and death. Simply put, they were instructed to look "beyond the magic," and to live their lives in the real world.

What I so admire about Paul is that in spite of living in the valley, the world of hard knocks, he continued to serve God with all the passion that he had when he was on the mountaintop. These verses give us just a little hint as to how Paul stayed faithful to God when the going got tough. Maybe what helped Paul will help you as well.

As Paul concludes his second missionary journey he has experienced a gamut of difficulties and hardships. He has been beaten, jailed, left for dead, rejected by his own people and God only knows what else. In effect, Paul, too, has seen beyond the magic. He has discovered first hand that the life of faith contains a lot of heartache. What is amazing is Paul's determination not to give in to despair.

Luke throws in a very subtle clue as to how Paul continues against such difficulties. Almost in passing Luke writes that Paul had made a vow: “Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken” (18:18). In reading Luke one must pay attention to every sentence, every word or one is likely to miss something important. Luke doesn’t telegraph his important points, he doesn’t say, “Now I’m getting ready to say something really significant so I want everyone to listen.” Luke expects the reader to be very attentive to his words.

Why would Luke tell us of a vow that Paul had made? Why inform us that Paul shaved his head at Cenchrea as a result of his vow? A vow was a kind of oath or promise or commitment. In a religious sense a vow was made to God. A vow became a very visible symbol that one was devoted to God. During one’s vow one would not cut his hair or eat meat or drink wine. These restrictions were means to remind the person taking a vow of his promise to God. In other words, Luke is telling us that Paul had made a promise to God. Taking vows or making promises to God was characteristic of Paul’s life of faith.

As I studied this passage I found myself again and again reading right over this verse. Vow just didn’t seem to me like a very significant subject to preach about. But maybe that is just the point. In our world today we have reduced vow or promise to “if I feel like it.” Paul was not a man who lived by his feelings--passions, yes, but not feelings. Feelings come and go but passions are bedrock convictions that define our being. Paul’s faith was disciplined by vows or promises that he made to God. Consequently, Paul never gave in to his despair and frustration because he was a man who kept his promises. Paul was a promise keeper.

Were there times when Paul felt like quitting? Absolutely. Were there times when he grew tired and frustrated? Absolutely. But Paul had made a promise to God and he was not going to break his promise. The promise to live his life as a servant of God steered Paul when his feelings would have led him down a different path. He writes near the end of his life: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2Tim. 4:7). In other words, Paul kept his promise to God.

Keeping promises is not very popular in today’s world. People don’t want to make vows or promises because they want to be free to do things on the spur of the moment. Making promises ties us down, keeps us from being free, from doing what we want when we want. For instance, take marriage as an example. Today more and more people are putting off marriage. It is much simpler to just live together than to make a promise to be there for each other forever.

But if we don’t make promises we end up allowing our feelings to rule and dominate us. Think of a young woman who decides early in life that she will wait until marriage before she gives herself to a man. She promises to God and to herself. She makes a vow. One night in a car with one she cares deeply about feelings get the best of her. But then she remembers her promise. Her promise guides her in a very difficult situation. Her promise keeps her from falling victim to her feelings.

The reason promises are needed is because by and large we are creatures who take the path of least resistance. But making and keeping promises disciplines us into becoming God’s children. Otherwise, we end up doing for God only what we feel like doing and only when we feel like it.

How important is the idea of promise? The Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament or the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The idea of covenant underscores the idea that God has made a promise or vow to his creation. Our entire relationship with God is based on the idea of promise or covenant! God has promised to stay with us, to care for us and love us. We have his word. But we, too, are invited to enter into covenant with God. God asks that we commit to him as well. Why? Because God knows unless we promise, we will be carried along by the winds of feeling.

Have you notice lately that a bunch of people are losing weight since the Christmas holidays? One man I know has lost over thirty pounds. Wow! That's great! I spoke with a young mother a few days ago who has lost over twenty pounds and she said, "Pastor, every day I'm tempted to eat those things I love, but I have promised that I am going to lose thirty-five pounds and I'm going to keep the weight off." Without her promise she would have yielded to temptation again and again.

Isn't it about time to make some long overdue promises to God? If you want to live a more consistent and powerful life, be a promise keeper. Amen.