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Advent Devotional "The Gracious Promise Fulfilled"

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Advent Devotional
The First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2005
Jeremiah 33:14-16
The Gracious Promise Fulfilled

As I write this, my family is filled with anticipation. Since mid-March, we have anticipated the fulfillment of the promise of new life. Andrew and Joy promised that we would be grandparents for the second time. Our anticipation heightened as time passed, as we learned the child's gender, and especially as we learned the child's name. Now, as Joy's due date has come and gone, anticipation is at fever pitch. The telephone doesn't ring that we don't wonder "Is this THE call?"

This anticipation reminds me of other times of promise and anticipation. Earliest, and perhaps chief, among them is Christmas. Since I was an only child, my parents usually took me to my grandparents' to enjoy Christmas morning with cousins. Full of anticipation, we wanted to stay up late and get up early (if we HAD to go to bed!); our parents had great difficulty ensuring that we were asleep so that they could prepare for the next morning and then get some sleep themselves. Later came the promise and anticipation of graduations, of engagement, of marriage, of two births into our family, of new engagements and new weddings and new families. So many promises, so much anticipation.

Reading Jeremiah reminded me how often and easily we promise things. Some promises are legal—contractual arrangements containing promises by both sides and enforceable at law. Others are social, both more (wedding vows) and less (meeting for lunch) significant. Sometimes promises are political—an

exchange of votes for future benefits. Sometimes promises are purely personal—to surrender bad habits, acquire good ones, or institute personal improvement (read, exercise, lose weight). I couldn't help thinking also about how often we merely imply or vaguely word promises, and especially how often we make them thoughtlessly, even as conversational filler. Perhaps we promise so easily and so often because most of them are conditional, reciprocal, and pretty self-serving.

Sadly, even in the face of how selfish our promises actually are, we have great difficulty keeping even the ones we make to ourselves. That's why we rely on legal or religious and moral pressures to ensure that certain important promises are kept. We know and treasure those about whom we can say "his word is his bond" but avoid people whose promises are always empty. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His hearers not to swear oaths, but to let their speech be simple and straightforward. I'm convinced that at least part of His reason for so doing was that He knew how jaded we become with those who are such ready promisers and such laggardly keepers.

We talk blithely about God's steadfastness in keeping His promises, but we generally miss (or ignore) their selflessness. Suppose He were as lax about keeping them as we, or they were as selfish in their content as ours. Could we be excited about those promises or anticipate and rejoice in their fulfillment? When the winds of adversity blow, would we cling to His promise to be with us always?

Advent begins with God's selfless promise, but two millennia have passed since its fulfillment. The gospel, the Good News, isn't news to us. We find in it all the freshness of week-old bread. We may give thanks, but

that thanksgiving tends to be mechanical rather than a spontaneous outpouring of appreciation and joy. How can Advent, as it must, begin in anticipation? The Baby has been born. We can rediscover the wonder and joy of anticipation if, in our unworthiness, we await, not a once-upon-a-time event, but the fulfillment of the gracious promise of our constant renewal in a new life freely given by a God of grace who walks with us and always keeps His promises.

Ray Granada