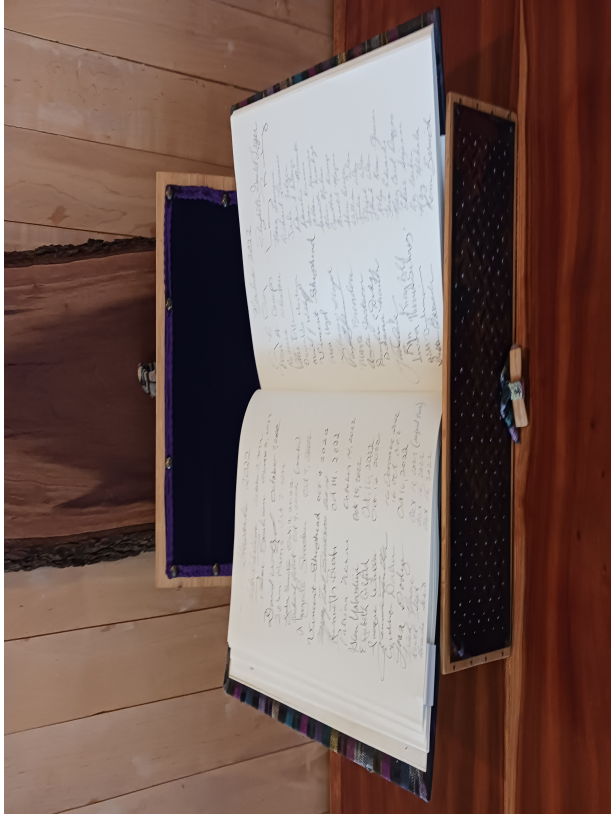


“Making and Keeping Promises” by Deborah Sokolove



Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 8, 2023

When I started to write this sermon, I did not intend to say anything about the situation in the Holy Land. However, yesterday, while I was visiting my oldest daughter in the peace and safety of her home on the Eastern Shore, we woke up to the news that Hamas had sent 3000 rockets and some unknown number of invaders into Israeli settlements, towns and cities on a major Jewish holy day. Unsurprisingly, the Israeli army retaliated with even greater force and more killing, and now there is a full-on war. At this time, we have not yet heard if any of our relatives have been killed, injured, or taken captive.

As shocking as this news probably was to all of you, for me and my daughter this felt like a recurring nightmare. You see, on October 6, 1973, when she was 8, my other daughter was 2, and my son was barely a month old, we were living in Nof Yam, a small working-class neighborhood near the sea, about half an hour north of Tel Aviv. It was a bright, beautiful, fall day. It was also Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish liturgical calendar. As I was nursing the baby, I could hear my defiantly atheist neighbor Borka up on his roof repairing his solar water heater, loudly and visibly demonstrating his disdain for the sound of pious prayers rising from the nearby synagogue.

Suddenly, the sirens began wailing their warnings to take shelter from Egyptian and Syrian bombs. Soon, the radio began announcing code words telling military reservists where and when to report, and then started to give clear instructions to civilians about covering windows and restricting the use of electric lights when night fell. As I cowered in fear with the children, my then-husband told me that despite being exempt from the draft, he was going to enlist. Soon, he – like all the rest of the men under the age of 55 – was at the front. Over the next few months, as the active war turned into a long, tense, ceasefire, I and the other mothers took care of our children and spent sleepless nights under blackout while never knowing when or if our husbands would come home. Eventually my children's father returned, but some of the neighborhood dads never did. It was a very bleak and terrifying time.

I am telling you this because whatever you are hearing on the news, and whatever you believe about whose fault it is, today there are families living in terror on both sides. And whatever you think about the current conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, I hope that you can understand that it has been going on not just since 1948, but for thousands of years in one form or another. The people the Bible calls Israelites

and Philistines are the ancestors of today's Israelis and Palestinians, and they have been fighting over the same piece of land ever since, so trying to figure out who is at fault in any particular incident is a hopeless project. This time, as was true fifty years ago, the people that I cannot help thinking of as "the other guys" started the active shooting while "my people" were simply observing a peaceful, holy day.

But the truth is that there is enough legitimate grievance on both sides to last another thousand years. I could explain more, but it would take too much time. Instead, I'll just say that, to my way of thinking, the only way out of this endless and endlessly escalating conflict would be for both sides to somehow be willing to listen to one another's long litany of pain, and to start building a new future of mutual respect and compassion together.

It seems to me that mutual respect and compassion are at the heart of today's Hebrew scripture and gospel readings, also. In today's reading from Exodus, the Israelite people are cowering at the foot of Mount Sinai through what seems to have been simultaneously a huge storm full of thunder and lightning AND a volcanic eruption full of fire and smoke while Moses has hiked through all the fires and explosions to the top of the mountain. There, God says, "Don't worship other gods and don't make idols to worship, either; don't take the divine name in vain; get some rest; honor your parents; don't murder; don't cheat on your spouse or entice someone else to cheat on their spouse; don't steal; don't lie; and don't be jealous of what your neighbor has." With these ten principles, or rules to live by as a community, God renews the covenant with the Israelites, promising to be with them and for them in a bond of mutual love. And we Christians have inherited these rules as the logical basis for a mutually respectful society.

If you subscribe to [Inward/Outward](#), you have probably already read some of my thoughts about today's Gospel reading. As we have just heard, Jesus tells a story about a rich absentee

landowner whose tenants kill off everyone he sends to collect the rent that they have promised to pay. I really struggle with this passage, as it seems to say that God is like an abusive ruler or an overbearing boss. And while most of me wants to believe that everyone gets forgiven and will live eternally in a great web of love no matter what, another part of me is like the Pharisees in the story, wanting the bad guys to get punished – or at least truly repent – before they are forgiven. After all, they broke their promise!

However, David Lose, a Lutheran pastor in Minneapolis, sees the story a little differently. In his

[Working Preacher](#) post called [“Crazy Love \(a.k.a. Preaching Matthew Against Matthew\)”](#) Lose asks,

Why on earth do these guys think that they’re going to inherit the vineyard? Oh, I know, it’s a legal *possibility*. But it’s not like that landlord has disappeared. He’s sent servants, and more servants, and then his son. Who’s to say he doesn’t have another son, or more servants, or an army, or at least a gang of thugs at his disposal to take care of these tenants. They’re crazy, I tell you, just like Bernie Madoff and all the other dudes all the way back to Charles Ponzi, thinking they can get something for nothing. They’re crazy.

But then, he goes on to say,

But they’re not half so crazy as this landowner! Think about it. First he sends servants, and they’re beaten, stoned, and killed. Then he sends more – not the police, mind you, or an army, just more servants – and *the same thing happens again*. So where does the bright idea come from to send his son, his heir, alone, to treat with these bloodthirsty hooligans? It’s absolutely crazy. Who would do such a thing? No one...except maybe a crazy landlord so desperate to be in relationship with these tenants that he will do anything, risk anything, to reach out of them. This landowner acts more like a desperate

parent, willing to do or say or try anything to reach out to a beloved and wayward child than he does a businessman. It's crazy, the kind of crazy that comes from being in love.

So while part of me *still* wants to agree with the Pharisees that the tenants need to be punished severely and the land rented to someone more reliable, I find myself relieved that there is a way of reading the story that doesn't make God into the exacting, legalistic punisher of so many fundamentalist fantasies, and also doesn't support the supercessionist understandings of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity that lead inexorably towards the antisemitism that is as baked into modern society as other kinds of racism and bigotry. I am grateful for finding a way to read this dreadful, violent story as a picture of a God who is so in love with us foolish, headstrong people that They will do whatever it takes to help us find our way back to loving Them and loving our neighbors, too, no matter how violent our fantasies of revenge might be. This God wants to keep Their promise to love and forgive us, AND wants us to keep our promises, too.

Here at Seekers, we use words like "accountability" and "commitment" as one way to describe the loving relationships that we have with one another and with God. While a lot of people may feel uncomfortable about these words, for me it is very simple. *Commitment* is another word for *promise*. When we make a promise to meet one another for lunch at a certain time and place, we do our best to be there. And if we don't show up, each of us have the right to let the other one know that they feel sad and upset. That right to share our disappointment when someone doesn't keep their promise is what *accountability* means to me.

When I make the Stewards commitment statement next week, I am promising you that I will do my part to make this church function smoothly, that I will show up Sundays to do my share of what needs to be done so that we can have a service, that I

will come to Stewards meetings prepared to make decisions for the good of the whole, and that I will come to mission group meetings ready to listen to what others say about their lives and to share something real about mine as we do whatever tasks God has called us together to do. And if I become like those crazy tenants who failed to keep their commitments to their equally crazy landowner, I promise to hear your heartbreak and to ask for your forgiveness.

I make these promise and do my best to keep them – and make amends when I am unable to do so – not because I am forced to, nor because I believe that I will be punished by God if I do not, but because I love God, I love this church, and I love all of you.

And because I love my people in Israel, I pray that this new round of war will end soon, and that Israelis and Palestinians will finally find a way to not only *make* promises of mutual respect and compassion, but even *keep them*, at last. Like generations of Jews, Christians, and Moslems before me, I pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Can I hear an “amen”?