

## **“Faithfulness: Words Made Real”**

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that your wisdom might make us bold in true compassion. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

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There was a song we sang in Junior Choir when I was a kid that taught us some big words. It went like this: “I am a promise. I am a possibility; I am a promise, with a capital P. I am a great, big bundle of potentiality!” It came into my head as I was contemplating our scriptures this morning, because a lot of what is being discussed here is about promises. “Faith,” the writer of Hebrews say, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And then, “what is seen was made from things that are not seen.”

Now that might sound like magical, supernatural talk to some of you, but really, it’s just a way of describing God’s faithfulness. Faithfulness is what is happening when a promise is made and kept. It brings something unseen – a commitment – into being, by taking the words that were said and following through to make them real. God has done this for us, and we have the capacity for this kind of faithfulness too. We can make real, tangible things from things unseen by following through on the invisible commitments of our hearts and the promises we speak into the world. Inasmuch as the Bible is a narrative of faith, it is a story of

promises made. It is also a story of promises kept and promises broken and promises renewed and promises shared and promises distorted. The very beginning of our Bible talks about God speaking the world into existence. I want to use that lens of the faithfulness that makes words real today, as we explore one central promise that shapes our tradition and its ripple effects.

One of the most common phrases connected to the word “promise” in our faith tradition is the idea of the “Promised Land.” Both of our scripture lessons today make reference to it – the Hebrews passage more explicitly and the Isaiah more subtly in verse 19’s reference to “the good of the land.” The idea of the “Promised Land” refers to the story in which God promised land to Abraham’s descendants, even though – as Hebrews notes – it was generations later that the promised was fulfilled, such that it remained but a promise for him. The idea of the “Promised Land” is closely related to the idea of the “Chosen People,” the idea that God has a special covenant with the Israelites, as if they are somehow God’s favorites. Now, it is perhaps important here to remind ourselves that these ideas arise from scriptures written by the Israelites themselves. You are aware, I assume, of how many ethnic groups around the world describe their own tribe, in their language, as “The People,” while using other terms for those outside their tribe. It is simply human to make ourselves the center of our own stories. The question for us today, is how that narrow focus on being “chosen” and “promised” shapes our faith as we try to follow

Jesus. And more specifically, I want to explore how these promises that we read about in these ancient texts have been distorted into the ideology we refer to as Christian Zionism. Because it is time for a reckoning with the ways in which our faith tradition, historically, has contributed to the suffering of other people.

To talk about Christian Zionism is to talk about two different but related things: Zionism and Christian Zionism. And to talk about it in church requires that we be very clear about many things. The word “Zion” comes up often in our scriptures and even in our songs. It is usually a symbolic reference to Jerusalem or the “mountain” near Jerusalem (which isn’t even really a mountain). But Zionism is also a political phenomenon that was born in the 1800s, when various people began to advocate for a “Jewish homeland” in the lands around Jerusalem. This idea emerged as colonialism was loosening its grip on the Holy Land and the territorial flux of the times, combined with the horrors of the Holocaust resulted in the 1948 war that give birth to the modern state of Israel. As you know, however, the mythology of that conflict continually tried to ignore the reality that were, in fact, already other people living there. Inasmuch as those native peoples were considered, they were given about as much significance as the various tribes the ancient Israelites battled in Old Testament times. They were, sadly enough, simply not the main characters in the story, not the “chosen people” to whom the land had been “promised.” We do well to remember at this point that they were, however, still actually people, who lived in

an actual place, with actual homes and families. They ended up under Israeli rule, just as they had been under British rule and Ottoman rule before that, though never considered Israeli, British, or Turkish.

It is important to note here the role of historic antisemitism – or more accurately prejudice against Jewish people – in the creation of Zionism. Jewish leaders longed for a Jewish state because the trauma of repeated pogroms and the Holocaust convinced them they could only feel safe in a country that was their own. This is a real problem. However, it is also true that the supposed benevolence of Western leaders who supported the creation of a “Jewish” state was motivated by the desire of those Western leaders to make sure the thousands of Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution ended up somewhere else. ‘We do think you should be safe – over there. Taking someone else’s land, not ours.’

At this point in history, Zionism has shifted into an ideology of Jewish supremacy, not just a longing for a safe haven. Despite claims of democracy, laws have been passed in the “secular” state of Israel clarifying that only Jewish citizens have certain rights, leaving everyone else to be second class citizens. Hard-core Zionists are, in fact, not satisfied with their current borders; they are bent on conquering more territory, to build what they call “Greater Israel,” with laws such as the one recently passed aiming to annex the West Bank. So that is Zionism, a political ideology. But what about Christian Zionism?

Christian Zionism is rooted in much the same soil as Jewish Zionism, inasmuch as the scriptural references are often the same. Like Christian Nationalism, there are varying levels at which it operates. Much of our mainline Protestant tradition is steeped in Christian Zionist assumptions – that the Jewish people are God’s “chosen people,” who were “promised” the Holy Land. But there are also extremist variations of Christian Zionism that take things much further. Much of this ideology revolves around eschatology, a big word that refers to theology about the “end times.” Now, as far as I’m concerned, I prefer to take Jesus’ word for it and admit that the end times aren’t actually any of my business. But many folks are not content with that. Instead, they have spent countless hours and pages scouring the scriptures for signs and clues and developing complex ideas about what’s going to happen and how. One of these theories is something called premillennial dispensationalism. This one has had inordinate influence over some of the folks shaping our foreign policy these days. The idea is that one of the requirements to get Jesus to come back again is that all the Jewish people need to be collected in Jerusalem. Now if that doesn’t sound like quite the same thing as a Jewish homeland, it’s because it isn’t. Christian Zionists are not primarily interested in protecting Jewish people; rather, this ideology treats Jewish people as pawns to try to game God’s system of apocalypse. It has always been shocking to me that Zionist Jews are willing to work with Christian Zionists when they so clearly don’t respect them as fully human. But that’s not my call, I guess.

If you're already a little confused, I don't blame you. Part of the reason this all feels so complicated is there a lot of words that different people are using to mean different things. And a lot of those words show up regularly in our scripture lessons. But these days, they're showing up in news reports just as often. I am often asked why I spend so much of my energy on the suffering of Palestine, as opposed to say, the genocide in Sudan or violence in Congo. I usually answer that it's because my tax dollars most directly and to an alarming degree pay for the suffering of Palestinians, at a level that makes me complicit. But that's the political answer. The religious answer is that the history of Christian Zionism within our faith traditions and the way it has propped up the Israeli regime, with no regard for the suffering of our Palestinian siblings, many of whom are fellow Christians, also makes us culpable. Our faith helped create this crisis; we must reckon with how we are allowing it to continue by the words our faith is making real.

Here's what I have learned, as I've gotten more deeply involved with this struggle. There are lots and lots of anti-Zionist Jews. They do not believe that they need a Jewish-only state to be safe, and they are not willing to oppress another people in order to feel safe. They understand their role in the world as Jews very differently than those who root it in a claim to specific territory. And that brings us back to this passage from Isaiah. There in verse 19 is that reference to being able to "eat the good of the land." But for the most part, this section that is arguing out the state of God's

covenant with the Israelites is not focused on territory; it's focused on ethical action. God is frustrated with them because they're saying a lot of words, carrying out ceremonies that are supposed to communicate their devotion to their God. But as we sing from the prophet Micah: God has told you, O mortal, what is good: to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God. The way to be faithful is not to keep saying you love God, but to show that you love God by loving the people God loves: rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow. Hands that are covered in blood cannot offer sincere prayers. Evil deeds break our relationship with God, in ways that make it hard to claim we are "chosen."

Even the passage in Hebrews doesn't seem to link Abraham's faithfulness to territory. Rather it talks about a "heavenly" country, implying that faithfulness to God's covenant of love is what builds our spiritual home.

Just as there are anti-Zionist Jewish people, we need to recognize that we don't have to be Christian Zionists to be faithful followers of Jesus. Indeed, I would argue such ideologies lead us away from the path of faithfulness. Either we proclaim the gospel that God loves all of creation – including all humanity – or we let go of the name of Jesus. If we believe that God's promises are for all people, we cannot let anyone use our name to deny them to some people. Our faith lives in how we make our words real. Many of the words Christians have uttered over the decades have made suffering far too real for others. We must repent of the ways we have distorted

God's promises for our own supposed benefit, causing unimaginable suffering for others. As we explore these ideas and their consequences more, as we learn from our Jewish siblings who understand God's promises in fresh ways, as we listen to our Palestinian siblings tell us about the way they live out their faith in the face of oppression, the Spirit will give us courage and wisdom to find our own path to faithfulness, where words of life and light and love can be made real in new ways. Hallelujah and Amen.