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Sermon preached Sunday July 2, 2017 at Osler
Mennonite Church: Jake Buhler

Text: Judges 11: 30 - 40

Topic: Jephthah: He promised too much

Promises... Promises... Promises...

These 3 words have been spoken millions
of times by people who have observed other people
who have not kept their (you guessed it...) their
promises.

From the earliest age "Keeping promises"
is in the vocabulary. Witness "I cross my heart
and hope to die"

is spoken by 6 and 7 year olds when they play.

After
When a town counselor is elected, she/he is required to
pledge or promise (not swear) to be honest, and to uphold
the law. The most important promise for many people is

"I do". The problem is that this promise
gets repeated more than once, sometimes for good reason.

At baptism, the candidate is asked whether she/he will follow the path of Jesus faithfully. The answer is "I will". When someone ~~signs~~ borrows money as in a student₃-loan, or as in a house mortgage, she/he signs a mortgage that the monies will be re-paid. Promises... Promises... Promises...

The Old Testament contains 4 big Promises and the New Testament one big Promise.

O.T. The first is made by God (Yahweh) who first apologizes and then promises ^{to Noah} never to send a big flood again. As a sign of his promise ^(covenant) he/she created a rainbow that appears after every rain (it the sun comes up). I have often thought of that promise in the mighty floods of Bangkok in the 1980s & 1990s when I waded 3½ feet in water on Sukhumvit Road. On one flood day in the City of Angels a boat & a bus collided head-on. Where was God's promise in 1986?

The second O.T. promise was with ^{Abram} Abraham. As best we know in antiquity, Abraham came out of Ur at the time when God called him. Yahweh promised him the Palestinian lands that included the Euphrates & much more if Abram would be true to the one-god, Yahweh. After the promise God changed Abram's name to Abraham.

The third big O.T. promise was with Moses. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, so the story goes. God would deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh if they would follow the 10 Commandments. God kept God's promise but the Israelites faltered many times.

The 4th big promise is with David who is promised both a Temple & a royal dynasty if he will follow the one-god. The dynasty will lead directly to Jesus of Nazareth. David was hardly much of an example of

anything. Jephthah has his son Sifomoa who had 700 wives & 300 girlfriends. Move over, President Trump!

We all promise things in our lives:

- In High German "Ich verspreche dir"
- In P/autdietsch "EKj vespreach die"
- In Thai "Pom sayya wa"
- In Vietnamese "oi hua"

In "The Cremation of Sam Mcbee" is a promise that after his death Sam Mcbee will be cremated. The famous line is

"A promise made is a debt unpaid"
(so I swore I would not fail)

Now to our text:

The Israelites have been unfaithful to Yahweh so God punishes them by having the Ammonites conquer them. Life is very tough. But at this very time is born to a prostitute, a son who is called Jephthah. As he grows up

his half-siblings drive him out of his home. He is homeless. But Jephthah is resourceful. He becomes a bandit, an outlaw. He creates his own militia ^{which} ~~is~~ ^{becomes} a small guerilla army. Everywhere he is feared for his marauding and pilaging.

And what happens next? The fearful Israelites are in contact with Jephthah and ask him to fight the Ammonites. Seeing an opportunity, Jephthah says that for a price he will fight the Ammonites. And the price? He demands to be their chieftain - like a King. They agree.

But now Jephthah is scared because he has never fought a warring nation before. So he says to God "if you help me beat the Ammonites I will sacrifice the first thing that comes out of my house."

At that time a typical house had the animals

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● living on the ground level while the family slept on the floor above the animals.

Meanwhile God is silent. God is not part of the bargain.

But the emboldened Jephthah attacks the Ammonites and beats them up. They flee. Israel is free at last.

Tired, but victorious, Jephthah hastens home. Thinking a wayward bullock or a young heifer might emerge from the house, it is instead his only daughter who has come to greet & congratulate him. The first thing he does is to blame her for this because he is now obligated to sacrifice ~~her~~ her. She is devastated. She does not blame him nor does she ask to be spared from death. Instead ● she bargains with ^{her} father to delay her death by 2 months. During this time she gathers her

friends & they head into the mountains to bemoan this tragedy, to cry that she will never ever marry & have children.

Let's leave the story a bit and talk about another story that is similar. In Greek mythology there was the general named Idomeneus. Idomeneus is caught in a horrible storm off the coast of Greece & his ships are all in danger of being dashed & smashed on the rocks. He makes a vow that if the goddess of the sea will deliver him he will sacrifice the first thing he sees when he lands safely on shore. ^{Idomeneus is delivered safely} Well his son greets him to welcome him back safely only to find out he will die because of his father's foolish vow.

It is hard to know if the story of Jephthah was copied by Idomeneus or the other way around.

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Back to Jephthah's daughter. She returns with her girlfriends and we never quite know her fate. We believe she died. Ever after that the young women commemorated her death by going 4 days each year to the mountains to remember her. It is a moving story. But one we can hardly celebrate!

Now to Jephthah the victorious warrior who chose not to break his vow, as it might have meant he would have to die instead. He held fast to a rash & foolish promise - a promise done in the absence of God.

There are people who say there is a redemptive feature to this story. They say that the son of a prostitute, rejected by his half brothers, did well. He is the outsider who rescued Israel, the people of God.

So God managed to use a rejected outsider, they say. Son of a worthless prostitute, he rose above the fray, some say. But a closer look reveals

other things. The prostitute and Jephthah's daughter are dispensable. Neither has a name, and in the custom of Israel, a person without a name is a nobody. But these two "nobodies" were important in a story of men.

But the writer of Judges provides us with a tiny tinge of irony. We are told that the father of ~~Jephthah~~ ^{Jephthah} was a man called Gilead. Gilead is a region of Israel. So by naming ~~to~~ Jephthah's father, ~~a~~ Gilead, any man in that region may have been his father. Gilead was a "john" and there may have been many of them. A "john" does not stay around to raise a potential child. The writer tells us the story many wanted to hear of a rejected "bastard," who rescued God's people, but by calling his father, Gilead, there is a hidden shame directed at all of ^{the} Gilead men.

● But if the writer hints that the Gileadites were "johns", to be shamed by the "righteous judges" of the day, ~~the~~ the same scribe puts his finger in the reader's eye and says "aha". The "aha" is that the ~~problem~~ ^{tragedy} ~~with~~ ^{of} Jephthah's daughter is that she was never able to bear a child. A man was never able to conquer her, impregnate her so that she would produce a child for him.

● That she would die seems to be okay. But it was not okay that she died a virgin. She died "incomplete" and "unfulfilled". In a man's world the women of Jephthah's time were chattel or property. There was no traditional marriage. Women were bought and the price was often several head of cattle.

● So while Jephthah rose from a reject to become ruler of Israel for 6 years he could have broken his promise ~~to~~ to sacrifice

his daughter. But he chose not to.

So why is this story included in the Hebrew Scriptures sacred to the Jews, and much later, sacred to the Christians? I am not sure. The sacred scrolls carried stories of heroism. And certainly the unnamed prostitute's son became a hero. That a woman had to die, was okay. In the oral tradition storytelling was how the narratives were transmitted. And this story may have happened

1,100 year before Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

But for 3,200 years the name of Jephthah's father has never been removed. It remains

Gilead, a reminder that when desire turns to action, any one of the male Gileadites ^{was} ~~is~~ willing to do "it" with an unnamed woman.

What a shadow to live under if you were a Gileadite man, to know you are, or could be, a ~~the~~ "john"

To the title of this sermon —
"Jephthah: he promised too much". Well it is
clear he promised too much. It is also clear he
promised stupidly, something that resulted in the
death of his only daughter who was given no name.

It is said that a homily must describe
the text, then make sense of it, and finally
find grace with which to teach you, the
listener. I think I have adequately
described the text and I tried to make
sense of it. But where is the lesson for me
you? I am stuck. I can find no
application.

But I can fast forward from Jephthah's
time by 1,000 to find the 5th great promise
in the Bible and the only big one in
the gospels. It involves Jesus in Matthew 26

at the Last Supper. It is there that he makes the biggest covenant or promise of all: ^(paraphrased) "If you drink from this cup and believe in me, there will be forgiveness and a new life of hope". It ~~is~~ trumps all the old covenants or promises. The reward for believing in Jesus is that it offers up hope. There is a parallel between Terry Stefanich's sermon last week and mine:

Terry compared the laws to the beatitudes. I am comparing the great promises. The conclusion is that the 5th Promise (Jesus') is that there is hope, not despair. Without hope we perish. Jesus challenges us to accept the promise in exchange for hope.

Fast forward to 2017.

What are we to learn from the text that may be important for us today?

Almost 500 years ago the first Mennonites/Anabaptists formulated a set of beliefs called "The Schleitheim Confession". One of the articles was that [we were] not to take an oath or swear when making a promise. I have often wondered why. The early Mennonites believed that taking an oath or swearing on the Bible, or another object, is to use an external or an outside item to tell the truth. They believed truth comes from within one's self. It is not, and cannot be founded, on an outside object. "Let your conversation be yea or nay." If I am responsible to God, I need not swear. And yet when I signed a document a number of years ago to buy a house, the lawyer had to be told to stroke out "swear" and write in "affirm". We need not rely on an outside object, nor do we

need to "swear." We will tell the truth of our own volition and under our own conscience since we are followers of Jesus Christ.

We live in a world where we must promise much of promise to make mortgage payments, telephone payments, TV package payments, VISA payments and much more. ~~Advertising~~ Advertising depends on promises. We must beware, or, we will, like Jephthah, promise too much. Our promises to be loyal to our spouse, our family, and this church, are important ones. Perhaps most important as they come out of our promise to follow the Way of Jesus, the most important promise of all. Prayer: As we go from here, may we keep our promise to live as you taught us, O Christ, Amen. JB