

## TRUSTING THE PROMISER

Preached in South Congregational UCC Church, Centerville, Mass.  
8.28.05

Reading of the Ecumenical Lections:

Ex.3.1-5; Psalm 105 (responsive, as in  
the Book of Worship); Psalm 26.1-8;  
Ro.12.9-21; Mt.16.21-28

Brothers and Sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1 Everybody's trying to rip us off. Loaded with booty, Hagar the Horrible & his fellow raiders arrive at the seashore & stare at the empty water. Exclaims his sidekick, "While we were stealing stuff from the castle, someone stole our boat!" "Yeah," says Hagar; "your just can't trust anyone these days." Where all are blind, none can even imagine sight; where everybody's unreliable, everybody's lonely, & nobody can even imagine a society of love, prosperity, peace, & joy--a society every human heart yearns for, and God "promises to those who trust him."

2 Trust is social glue. When trust is lost, things become unstuck & fall apart--contracts of all kinds (marital, societal, ecclesial, commercial, political). Trust moves from a future confidently hoped for into a promissory present, either a one-way covenant of promiser & truster or a two-way covenant of mutual promise & trust. Always, whether or not it's stated, the promise is alive inside the trust; &, if the relationship is personal, the promiser is inside the promise: so, this sermon's title is not "Trusting the Promise" but rather "Trusting the Promiser"--as in #442 of our hymnal: "'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take him at his word, just to rest upon his promise....Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him, precious Jesus! O for grace to trust him more!" Yes, trusting God is sweet, but it's also hard to do. Adam & Eve found it impossible, the apple looked just too good, & so they stopped trusting God, they became unglued from communion with God; & that's the Bible's definition of "sin," which is the only word that points to everything that's wrong with us & the world.

Against this primal sin of failure to trust the Creator-Redeemer-Consummator of life, God himself has labored mightily to win us back to the only Promiser who can be relied on without limit. In our first scripture this morning, God promised Moses that he'd use him to free his people from slavery in Egypt--Moses, who was wanted back in Egypt for murder! Done, after Moses & his people clawed their way over a heap of troubles & temptations: besides being difficult for the heart, trust is hard on the hands. The third scripture tells the same story, the story of the exodus from Egypt, & calls on us to "remember the wonders of the Lord," the bread from heaven & water from the rock, light after darkness, life with God in a free land, joy after long sorrow. The psalm's implicit point is this: Our forebears & we have found God the Promiser to be reliable, faithful to his promise to be with us for all we need to be & to become: how could we ever be so foolish as to put our trust elsewhere?

3 But the world, our American world, bombards us to put our trust instead in things & in ourselves. In a 7.20.05 Sojo Mail, David Batstone, in a piece titled "Mass Media Aliens are Sucking Out Your Kids' Brains," reports David Walsh (SELLING OUR AMERICA'S CHILDREN) as asserting that it's "normal" for an Am. child to be daily exposed to these dominant media themes: (1) "Happiness is found in having things." (2) "Get all you can for yourself." (3) "Get it all as quickly as you can." (4) "Win at all costs." (5) "Violence is entertaining." (6) "Always seek pleasure and avoid boredom." "Normal" is 4½ hours daily exposure to what America's enemies rightly call a form of barbarism! Well, when our children turn from the media & go to public school, aren't they there taught to trust God, the only promiser worth trusting, rather than in the things Madison Avenue uses as lures to suck money out of them? No, the public school teaches them to put their trust in their own potential, ignorant of the biblical wisdom that whatever knowledge we can generate for ourselves can never lead us--no matter the outward successes of "science" so-called--to know what we are to do & become. Rather, listen to Jeremiah (10.23--in the KJV, as I learned it): "O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." In the Bible I carried in a jacket pocket all the way through college (& that still, after 70 years, has not yet fallen apart), that's the only cross-reference to Proverbs 3.5-6 (one of the Bible's many calls to put our trust in God, not in things or in ourselves): "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understand-

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ing. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." Please note the either/or: your choice, trust the Lord or your own understanding. But the choice is not as stark as it seems: the more we trust the Lord, the more we understand ourselves, the more our understanding of everything is illumined by the Holy Spirit, so the easier it becomes to say "Not my will but yours, be done." And the more we are free from the prison of self, free (as our Lord says in today's fifth reading) to forget ourselves & follow him, bearing our cross, losing our life to find it. Yesterday an old saint, who has lived her life for others, phoned Loree & me from far away in time & memory to tell us of the peace & joy she has known these past six years after someone said to her, on her 80th birthday, "Jesus is the one who lifts your load, not you." And my heart started silently singing, "Yes, Jesus took my burden I could no longer bear. Yes, Jesus took my burden in answer to my prayer. My anxious fears subsided, my spirit was made strong. For Jesus took my burden, and left me with a song."

4 So if we trust God the Promiser, how are we to live? He has not left us in doubt. Our UCC Statement of Faith puts it this way: "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death [conquering sin and death] and reconciling the world to himself." What then does living as a Christian look like? When Miroslav Volf, a great theologian who suffered much with his people when they were being slaughtered by a neighboring nation, was asked that question, I heard him read what was our fourth reading this morning. I suggest that you read it silently later today, perhaps in connect with reading this sermon (having picked up a copy in the Fellowship Hall). I warn you that it's radical. It ends with the advice to "overcome evil with good." How different our lives, how different our world, if we let the Lord give us the courage to be real Christians!

5 This brings us to the last of our scriptures of the morning, the second one I read. Verse 3 has the OT two main words describing God's character, the model for ours. They are "chesed" (loyal love) & "emeth" ("truth & trustworthiness"). (They often appear together, as in Ps.138.2b.) Our psalmist says O Lord, "your lovingkindness is ever before my eyes, & I walk faithfully in your faithfulness [your promise-keeping] to me." I translated the sentence's last Hebrew word ("be' amiteka") with those eight English words which put our promise-keeping to God within the sphere of his promise-keeping to us: we trust him, & pray for the grace so to live that he, & people, can trust us. (I checked out 30 English Bibles, & only three had the both-ways meaning of faithfulness. Many had one meaning in the text & the other in a footnote--e.g., NRSV has "I walk in faithfulness to you" & footnote "in your faithfulness.")

6 Finally, our UCC Statement of Faith brings together the two realities in this sermon's title, viz. trust & promise. Here are the words: God "promises, to all who trust him." Note: he promises nothing to those who don't trust him. But to those who do, he makes four promises, which I can do little more than mention (& hope you'll meditate on & pray about later):

(1) "forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace." In our sinful selfish individualism we've come unglued from God & people, & forgiveness re-glues us (as the Lord's Prayer says, God forgives us as we forgive others). History is more than the story of battles, it is the battle of stories. In any one of 910 languages, you can see our Christian story by typing into the net "jesusfilm.org"--seen by 5 billion so far!

(2) "courage in the struggle for justice and peace." Our Bible teaches us to trust in God's providential power & grace, & our country was founded "with strong reliance on providence." Our faith rejects as false the notions that things happen only randomly (as atheistic evolutionists teach) or rigidly (by the predetermination of fate, as many other religions believe). God suffers with us toward his kingdom!

(3) "his presence in trial and rejoicing." Roger Schutz life & (9 days ago) death.

(4) "and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end." Last week a houseguest (who has organized credit courses in a high-security women's prison) told us that in his volunteer work, he often says "I do not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future." We are made to walk into the arms of God if only we trust him & day by day try to walk, by his grace, in the steps of our Lord Jesus.