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“Through his prophets he promised that he would save us...” (Luke 1:69).

*2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Luke 1:67-79*

Advent ends with the Canticle of Zechariah, who praises God for keeping every promise. The *Benedictus* is itself a precursor to Christmas, and it brings the full weight and solemnity of God’s covenant with Israel to the moment when a new covenant is proclaimed by the birth of Jesus. The transfer is of profound and mysterious portent. The first covenant was based on fidelity to the Law. The second covenant is based on the pure gift of divine Mercy.

Like the other canticles in the Bible, the emphasis is on fulfilling and protecting the continuity of God’s original promise to Abraham. The two threats to that promise were sterility—the failure to produce an heir—and the power of enemies to sever the line of succession. The canticle and today’s first reading from 2 Sam emphasize God’s protection of the genealogy from both threats as it passed from Abraham to David and to the Messiah.

King David is secure on the throne because God has given him “rest from his enemies.” The phrase is a window onto the violent world of the monarchy. A secure king was one who could sleep at night without worrying about assassination from without or from within his own house. Attempts to subvert a royal line involved the slaughter of whole families. Herod’s murder of the Holy Innocents to eliminate any rival was an example.

Nathan’s prophecy to David that his house would continue after his death reassures him that his progeny will continue, though we know that chaos and division also befall his family. Zechariah rejoices that despite the long and tortuous history of Israel, God’s promise of salvation has survived and is now coming true. John’s miraculous conception signals a leap forward and Mary’s virginal conception completes this leap with the Incarnation, *Emmanuel*, God-with-us in the person of Jesus.

The significance of a promise-kept is not foreign to us. Promises underly history, national identity and the great stories of faith and literature. People endure great adversity to keep a promise or to believe in one. Promises define relationships and when broken are the source of great suffering. Restoring faith by healing the wounds inflicted by broken promises is the central drama of many lives and where they discover the power of Mercy.

Perhaps the deepest promise of all is that love is stronger than death. If it is not, death defeats everything. Christmas celebrates the triumph of love and the transcendent purpose of life, but also God’s promise to complete our human journeys in the embrace of divine love forever.

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