

**Sermon:** *Promises! Promises!*  
**Text:** *Luke 3:15 – 17, 21 – 22*  
**Date:** *January 10, 2010 AM*  
**Place:** *Jesup First UMC*

A promise is a promise! Or is it? Booker T. Washington once met a man, a former slave from Virginia, who made a contract with his master. Two or three years prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, this man went to his master and asked to buy his freedom. They agreed on a price and soon the slave left for Ohio where he could make more money and buy his freedom. Well, when President Lincoln emancipated the slaves, the man still owed his former master \$300. So, early one morning, he set out walking from his home in Ohio to his master's home in Virginia. And he walked onto the front porch, knocked on the door, and when his master answered, he placed every last dollar in his hands. Now, Mr. Washington was puzzled and he asked the man: Why? Why – when he was free – would he make that trip on foot? Why would he insist on paying every last dollar? And the man said: *"I made him a promise and a promise should never be broken."*

A promise is a promise! Or is it? How many of you made a New Year's Resolution? ... Okay! Now, be honest! How many of you have already broken it? One day, right after New Year's, a pastor was walking through the mall when he came across an overweight man standing on one of those scales that you put a quarter into and the alarm goes off. Well, there he was ... standing on the scale ... with a discussed look on his face ... and so the pastor asked him: *"Bad news?"* The man said: *"Yea, I started this diet about a*

*week ago, but the scale says I've gained weight. Please, sir, will you do me a favor? Will you hold my coat and my candy bar for me?"* So much for your New Year's Resolutions!

In our text this morning, Luke tells us about a very significant day in Jesus' life. One day, John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing by the River Jordan when Jesus came to be baptized too. And after He had been baptized, while He was praying, suddenly the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and He heard a voice from heaven that said: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; and with you I am well pleased.*"

Now, there is a lot of debate about this. Why did Jesus come to be baptized? ***Well, maybe He was coming for forgiveness!*** You see, the Gospels tell us John was "*preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,*" but those same Gospels tell us Jesus was sinless. So, He wasn't coming to repent; He wasn't coming because He needed to be clean.

Well, maybe He was coming because He wanted to be like us! The Bible is clear that Jesus was the eternal Son of God. Even in our text, God's voice affirms: "*You are my Son, the Beloved.*" And so, in Jesus, the eternal Son of God put on flesh and lived among us. John said: "*The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.*" Maybe, just maybe His baptism was a further attempt to be one of us, to connect more fully with us at our worst and yet, at our best. Yea, I believe there is something to that. Jesus came to be baptized to identify with us.

But maybe there's something more, for you see, something seems to happen there, by the waters of the Jordan that changed Jesus' life and indeed has the possibility of changing ours as well. Luke seems to say something unique about Jesus' baptism. He says: "After He was baptized, while He was praying," Jesus had an experience with His Father. The sky opened; the Holy Spirit descended; and God spoke. And maybe that's because of why Jesus was there.

Could it be that Jesus came to be baptized to commit Himself to His Father's will? Could it be that His baptism was for Him what ours is for us: a time to make promises, to commit ourselves to God?

At our baptism, or at our Confirmation, or when we joined the church, we make promises to God. We promise to love God, to resist evil in all its forms, and to grow in Christian discipleship. We promise to be faithful to the church through our Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service, and Witness. And we promise to love one another, to surround one another with a community of care so that we might help one another grow in Christian discipleship. Now, a promise is a promise! Or is it?

There was once a wealthy businessman who was on his deathbed. So, he called for his pastor and said: "*Preacher man, if God heals me, I'll give the church a million dollars.*" Well, the Lord intervened and the man got better and within a few months, he was back in church. And one day, the pastor went to see him and said: "*You know, when you were so sick, you made a promise to give a million dollars to the church if God*

*healed you. Have you thought about that promise lately?"* And the man said: "*Oh Preacher, did I say that? I guess that just proves how sick I really was.*"

Brothers and Sisters, I believe God really cares about our promises, especially those we make in church. And so, this morning, at the beginning of a new year, let us consider again our promises.

***I promise to be faithful to Jesup First UMC and uphold it with my prayers!*** We promise to pray for the church, for its pastor, its staff, its leaders, and its programs and ministries. Now this is the power of the church. The vision and direction we need comes – not in a committee meeting or out under the oak tree, but – on our knees. But when have we prayed – really prayed – for God to move among us, to lead us, to give us a vision and help us to live into it. Hey, a promise is a promise! Or is it?

***I promise to be faithful to Jesup First UMC and uphold it with my presence!*** Even in the days of the Early Church, faithfulness in church attendance had already become a problem. The New Testament writers talk about those "*who have fallen away*" and the writer of Hebrews warns us: "*Do not forsake the gathering of yourselves.*" When have we put our church before the ball game, before the weekend at the coast, before the convenience of sleeping in? After all, a promise is a promise! Or is it?

***I promise to be faithful to Jesup First UMC and uphold it with my gifts.*** You know, we could spend the rest of our time discussing what the Bible says about financial giving. And it runs all the way

from giving one tenth to giving everything we have like the widow's mite. And somewhere in there is God's command for us. God said: "**Bring the full tithe into the storehouse.**" When have we done that, when have we given sacrificially. You know, a promise is a promise! Or is it?

***I promise to be faithful to Jesup First UMC and uphold it with my service.*** The Letters of the New Testament, especially Paul's letters, tell us God has given to each of His children a Spiritual Gift, a special enabling and empowering that allows us to continue the ministry of Jesus in the church and in the world. Paul said: "**To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**" And then, through the investment of our time and energy, many of us have developed skills and talents that God can use in the ministry of the church. And that's what we promise to do, and a promise is a promise! Or is it?

***I promise to be faithful to Jesup First UMC and uphold it with my witness.*** That simply means – in the words of the old hymn – "We've a story to tell to the nations." Jesus told the disciples: "**But wait in Jerusalem until you have received power from on high and then, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the utter most parts of the world.**" And so, we must bear witness to the goodness of God everywhere we go, because that's what we've promised to do and a promise is a promise. Or is it?

Now, here's something to think about: on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being totally unfaithful and 10 being totally faithful), where would you place yourself in

each of these areas? How are you at keeping the promises of your baptism?

Now, let's consider something else: on that same scale of 1 to 10, how faithful was Jesus? You see, I believe Jesus made a promise to His Father that day, a commitment of His life to the plan of His Father and He kept that promise. On the last night of His life, when He was tempted to walk away from the promise, He prayed: "*Not my will but your will be done.*" And I'm so glad that He went all the way to the cross for me and you, because in keeping His promise He redeemed us from the muck and mire of life and gave to us life, abundant and eternal, and He also set an example for us that we can keep our promises too.