

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Let me begin with a story. On Friday, March the 29th, 1984, Robert Cunningham ate a meal of linguini and clam at his favorite restaurant, Sal's Pizzeria, where he'd been a regular customer for seven years. And he was served by his waitress Phyllis Penzo, who'd worked at Sal's for 19 years. After his meal Cunningham made a good-natured offer to the waitress, Penzo.

He said to her, "You can either have a tip, or split my winnings on the lottery." She took the latter. Over coffee, they chose some numbers, and they entered the draw. Come Saturday night, Cunningham won the lottery. The jackpot was six million dollars, so he faced the moment of truth. Would he keep his promise and give the waitress a tip of three million dollars? I'm pleased to say he did. He said, "I wouldn't back out. Besides, friendship means more than money." I'm sure we all agree that it's important to keep a promise, and it's a good day to be thinking about promises because Gabriel's parents and godparents will soon be making very serious promises on his behalf.

Saint Paul wrote that very confusing reading from the second letter to the Corinthians and I want to speak about. He wrote this bit because he'd been being accused of breaking a promise. In his first letter to them, he said he was going to stop and see them on his journey to Macedonia. But it doesn't appear that worked out, and now it looks as if he's changing his plans again. We read this: "Since I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double favor. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia, and have you send me on to Judea."

He wanted to visit them, he said that he'd visit them, but it doesn't look as if he did visit them, and all of this provided ammunition to Paul's enemies in Corinth of which there were many. Now they could say, "How can we trust someone who breaks their promises? We don't know if he's coming. He says one thing and then does another. He says yes one minute, and no the next." And Paul must've known that this was a serious accusation because what his enemies are saying is, "If you can't trust what he says about his travel plans, how can you trust what he says when he preaches?"

So Paul comes out fighting and says, "I'm not the kind of the person who in the same breath says yes and no. I keep my promises." If you want to know how it's possible to say yes and no in your same breath, then I suggest you call an airline. Call an airline that's offering cheap flights. The conversation might go something like this. "I hear you're offering flights to Denver for 43 dollars. Is that right?" "Yes." "Can I go on Tuesday?" "Yes." "Can I go at that price?" "Well, no, not on Tuesday." "What about the week after? Can I go the week after?" "Yes." "Okay, well I want a ticket. I'll go Wednesday to Friday." "Oh, you can't go then. No, that's a no, because you have to stay at Saturday night." And the conversation would go on, yes and no, in the same breath.

Paul says he keeps his promises, and more importantly, God keeps his promises. The promises of God are not like the promises of a budget airline, thank goodness. He says this, "For the son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, was not yes and no, but in him it was always yes. For in him, every one of God's promise is a yes." No matter what promise has been made in the bible, the answer Paul says is "Yes, in Jesus Christ." That's an amazing statement.

I don't know how many promises there are in the Bible. I've lost count, but there are hundreds. The bible's full of promises, and the promises in the bible are big, serious promises. We're talking about things like eternal life, forgiveness, peace, salvation, the fact that God would make himself known. These are major league promises, and they're all fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

There are some promises that simply aren't worth the trouble. Shortly before I left England I received a letter from my bank. They sent me a flyer with a promotional offer on it. They were running it from the first of June to July the forth, and the statement on the flyer said that if I agreed to join the scheme, within that timeframe, they promised and I quote, "A complimentary pack of Tetley's drawstring tea bags and a Cadbury snack wafer." Big deal. There's no one likes a cup of tea, and a snack more than me, but it didn't make me take up the offer. That was not a promise that grabbed me, but these one do.

Hear these promises of God. I like the sound of these promises, Jesus said, "I will be you always to the very end of the age." Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me

has eternal life." So John says, "If we acknowledge our sins, God is faithful and will forgive us our sins." I could go on, but these are examples of big promises, and God delivers on his promises, not like Hoover vacuum cleaners. I don't think you had the offer that Hoover made over here, but they made a very famous offer in England a few years ago, where they said that if you bought a Hoover vacuum cleaner, you got a free ticket, airline ticket to New York.

This sounded fantastic, and people soon realized that the value of the airline ticket was worth more than the vacuum cleaner, so they were inundated. They had to withdraw the offering 24 hours because they couldn't sustain it. The offer sounded too good to be true, and it was. The offer was taken back in 24 hours, and there are those who would regard the promises of God recorded in the bible as sort of spiritual, heavenly Hoover offers. Pie in the sky. Too good to be true.

Saint Paul says, "No. God delivers on his promises. Whatever the promise, the answer is, yes in Christ Jesus. There are no empty promises, no caveats, no strings attached." The message of this passage is that God says, "Yes in Christ Jesus."

So much for the promise of God, we need to make a response in the words of this passage, God says "Yes," and we say, "Amen." For this reason he writes, "It is through him that we say the amen to the glory of God."

Paul's indulging in a bit of word play here, because in Hebrew, the word yes, and the word amen, are very similar. We lose sight of that because us Anglicans, we've reduced amen to a sort of ritualistic word that we politely add to mark the end of the prayer. But, it's original meaning was much more robust. It was a kind of, "Yes indeed! That's right, preach it brother!" I once went to a Pentecostal church where they did shout out things like that.

I was preaching, they'd have got none of it. Dead silence. I'd been preaching about five minutes and I heard someone shout out from the back, "Help him Jesus!" That's when I knew it wasn't going terrible well. But, amen, it's a word that expresses our confidence that because of Jesus we can offer our prayers to God confident that he will hear. That's a promise that God hears our prayer. It's a word that expresses our belief that we can appropriate the promises of God for

ourselves, because Jesus is God's guarantee, the unbreakable yes.

As we say, "Amen," we speak about our confidence in God's promises, and we respond. It's a way of showing a response. Faith believes it, hope anticipates it, and patience awaits it. As we respond as a people, we're sealed with the Holy Spirit, as we'll be sealing Gabriel shortly, very shortly actually Gabriel, just hang in there. We read this. "But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us by putting his seal on us, and giving us his spirit in our hearts as a first installment."

I want to close just by picking out a metaphor that Saint Paul's using in that verse. It's the word arrabon in Greek, and arrabon wasn't a churchy word, it was a secular word, it was a word drawn from the marketplace, a commercial word. An arrabon was a first installment, a down payment, and it was a common word to be used at the time, like a deposit. It was a down payment of a total amount that was due to be paid. It's both of contractual obligation, and it guarantees the fulfillment of that contract.

What Paul is saying here is that the presence of God's Holy Spirit in our lives, his spirit in our hearts, is God's arrabon, his down payment in our lives of the promises that will be fulfilled. It's the first installment. It's a sign that we can live now God's spiritual life, life in God's eternal kingdom. It's not just a lifetime guarantee of being in God's presence, it's an after-lifetime guarantee of living with God. Our God is a god of promise, and as we invite him to dwell in our hearts by his spirit, we become a people of the promise.

God says, "Yes in Jesus," and we as his people respond, "Amen."