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Spiritual Essence: Broken Promises

Seven-year-old Lucy, who was named after the song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," bounces down the sidewalk from her foster parents' home and across the lawn, with half a smile on her face, seeming to run directly into the outstretched arms of her developmentally delayed single father, Sam. He crouches down to embrace her, but instead of falling into his arms, her little face crumples immediately into total devastation, and her tiny fists beat at his chest. "You never came!" she screams. "You never called! You forgot about me! How could you forget me? I hate you! I hate you!" Tears roll down her cheeks. Lucy doesn't know the circumstances of her father's failure to visit her, or the challenges he faced in trying. But she does know the complete devastation of a broken promise.

This scene is one of many poignant moments in the movie *I Am Sam*. And even though it is fiction, it resonates with real-life experiences of broken promises. A child promises over and over again to be home on time. A lover promises never to hurt you. A partner promises to love and cherish until death do us part. A parent promises to nurture and support your growth and personal safety, and to love you unconditionally. The Christians promise at the baptismal font to respect the dignity of every human being. A church promises to be open to everyone but in reality closes its doors all too often.

Broken promises are all too familiar, especially to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians, yet never fail to conjure doubt, to challenge trust. How can we help but question God's steadfastness as we stand, vulnerable, yearning for the freedom from knowing that another broken promise will inevitably break our hearts again?

The psalmist gets it. The lament in Psalm 13 shows this devastation: "How long, Lord, will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" The emotion seems to ascend, the note of desperation and urgency pitched slightly higher with each plea.

We get it, too, with the questions that can't help but be asked in response to Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, Isaac, in the 22nd chapter of Genesis – a passage which has troubled people for countless generations. It is a compelling story of an impossible promise of a son, a child whose name would mean "Laughter," given to a barren wife aged beyond hope for birth,

rev. tanya wallace

a promise wonderfully kept. Abraham has his heart's desire, a gift from God. Then, God speaks: "Take your laughter, the beloved, your only son, and sacrifice him." And our hearts break with the very thought of God's promise broken again.

This test begs the question of whether God can be trusted. This God makes a promise, proceeds to fulfill that promise, then seems to take it back. God's promises are placed in jeopardy. But this request of sacrifice comes only after God's promise to Abraham of future generations. Abraham learned chapters ago in

assertion we are simultaneously confronted with our own perpetual neediness and comforted by the proclamation of God's unflinching love. The agony and ecstasy belong together, for to deny one is to turn our backs on the true suffering of the world or away from God's promise of new life.

And thus this constantly disturbing story of Abraham is not cheap talk of blind faith, easily explained away or made better and wrapped with a neat bow, but a life-changing call to God's covenant – God's ultimate promise – the covenant made to Abraham, the covenant made to Isaac and Ishmael, the covenant made between life partners, the covenant we make to God, the covenant God makes to us.

Oh, and the movie? The scene does not end with the little girl's devastation but with the father's promise – in the only words he could muster, with the intellectual capacity of a seven-year-old, in the words which could easily be empty, except that

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Genesis, from his encounters, that God is indeed just, and that he need only trust on this occasion. We yearn to make sense of it, but it doesn't make sense. In the covenant that God makes, lies the ultimate promise – a promise that goes beyond what we can rationally comprehend.

Our psalmist gets this, too. To trust God does not mean always to respond in an unquestioning way. One can't help but question and to maintain our instinct to shield and protect a broken heart. The juxtaposition of complaint and praise in the 13th psalm affirms the realities of devastation and the trust in God's steadfast love, which is proclaimed by the end of the journey that the psalmist sings.

God is involved in all of life – even life at its worst. In this

the audience already knows them to be true: "No," he says, "I didn't forget you. I would never forget you. Could you not be mad at me for one second, ok? Because I want to tell you one thing, ok? Ok? Because last night I was writing you a letter and the words I got were too big, ok? And I said Dear Lucy, I am sorry I hurt your feelings and I was thinking about you all of the time, and Lucy on a hammock, and Lucy at school, and Lucy in the sky, and kisses and hugs, Daddy. And P.S. I love you like a song. P.S. I love you like in the song. Ok?" ▼

The Rev. Tanya Wallace is the Canon Educator at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, in Burlington. She lives with her partner Kathleen in South Burlington.



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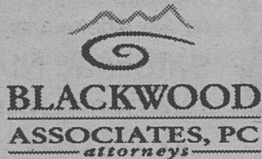
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