

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA



January 7, 2026

PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

The Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés tells how she once asked students in her philosophy class to raise their hands if they remembered a time when someone made an important promise to them or when they had made one to someone else. Only a handful of students raised their hands. We have become a people, she writes, who have “many projects but very few promises.”

Our New Year’s resolutions are essentially promises we make to ourselves. A standard January cliché observes that most of these resolutions do not survive more than a few days or weeks. They are aspirational projects more than actual promises.

Garcés suggests that making and keeping promises has been devalued by the sheer volume of unrealistic or over-hyped promises with which we are daily bombarded. Promises of how a new technology will improve our lives, how a certain cosmetic or nutritional supplement will transform our looks or health, how a travel destination will revitalize our outlook on life. Salespeople and politicians “promise us the moon and deliver a clod of dirt” some cynic once said to me. Too often we are promised the impossible, which is not really a promise at all. These false or unrealistic promises have conditioned us to assume that “giving our word” is merely performative, if not outright deceptive or an act of seduction.

Genuine promises create a future. Although our promises are made in the present, they are fulfilled in the future. Our English word “promise” comes via Old French from Latin where it literally meant “to send before” (pro + mittere). When we promise something, we are sending our actions ahead of us. We are committing ourselves at this present moment to a certain future outcome. Making and keeping promises is an important aspect of how we make sense of ourselves as people who inhabit time past, present, and future.

The word “promise” occurs 258 times in the bible according to one biblical concordance. The related word “oath” occurs just under 300 times. The New Testament word we translate as “promise” is, in Greek, “ep+angelleo,” which literally means to “announce before.”

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who makes and keeps promises. God promises Abraham and Sarah children. Later he promises them a land. Moses leads the people out of slavery into a promised land that flows with milk and honey. On the night of his betrayal and arrest, Jesus promises to send a comforter to his disciples once he is gone. Again and again, the bible affirms that God’s promises are sure and dependable.

Baptism above all else is about making and keeping promises: Those we make to God and those God makes to us. This Sunday we celebrate Jesus’ baptism by John in the River Jordan and are invited to remember our own baptisms. In baptism we promise to God that we will resist evil in all its personal and social expressions and that we will grow in the love, knowledge, and service of God and neighbor. Usually our attention focuses on what we are promising to be and do as disciples of Jesus. We are trusting that our promises to God are not short-term, aspirational “projects” but enduring “promises” we will inhabit across our lives.

These promises, as important they are, are not the only promises made in baptism. Baptism also announces God’s promises to us. God promises never to abandon us and to grant us new beginnings when we find ourselves at a dead end. God promises to guard and guide us amid life’s complex choices and to nurture us in love. The point of our Sunday-by-Sunday act of confession and pardon is not to remind us that we are miserable sinners in the hands of an angry God. They announce the sturdy dependability of God’s promises to us. God’s promises never falter or fail even when we feel that our promises to God are occasionally shaky or uncertain. As Isaiah 42:1-4 proclaims: “Have no fear, for I have redeemed you; I call you by name, you are mine. When you pass through water I shall be with you; when you pass through rivers they will not overwhelm you; walk through fire, and you will not be scorched, through flames, and they will not burn you. You are [precious] to me ... you are honored and I love you...”

It's a promise that, no matter what happens, we are forever held in a caring embrace as wide as the universe. As the old gospel song says, we are "standing on the promises of God...standing on the promises that cannot fail, when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail," Bound to God "by love's strong cord...standing on the promises of God."

Blessings,
Pastor Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

UPDATE ON MASKS

There is an uptick in cases of respiratory illnesses reported both by hospitals and in the media. In light of the increased cases of respiratory illness we encourage those attending worship with chronic conditions or heightened risk of infection to consider masking for worship. For all of us, if we have a fever or other flu-like symptoms or have had the flu within the last 7-10 days, to consider participating in worship online rather than in person or to wear a mask. We have masks available in the sanctuary near the small tables where you find the bulletins.

ALTAR FLOWERS

We invite you to provide beautiful flowers for our church altar on Sunday morning. The following dates are open: February 8th and 22nd and all of March. To reserve dates please look at the Flower Calendar sign up poster in Fellowship Hall or call the church office with any questions (525-4121). Thank you so much, The Flower Committee

HOW ABOUT DOING A PUZZLE???

It's that "indoor" time of year when the nights are VERY long. In my need to keep busy, I started doing puzzles, especially in the cold winter months! I find this activity to be quite relaxing and some even say it's good for your brain, too.

Several are currently on the shelves in the breezeway. Just take one home and when you are done, put it back or pass it along so someone else can do it. Enjoy!!!

THANK YOU NOTE: Choir at Christmas

Thoughts of appreciation to the choir volunteers who dedicated their time and talent for our Advent and Christmas season. It was so wonderful to hear your blended voices and see you in our beautiful choir robes!

KEEPING CHILDREN WARM

What child doesn't lose a hat or a pair of mittens **at least once** during the cold winter? Please help us fill the basket in the breezeway with new or gently used hats, gloves, mittens and scarves for the children at Kensington School to keep them warm...because we care. Neighbors helping neighbors in need, it's what we do so well. Thank you so much!

PRAYER

God of streams and rivers, oceans and raindrops: When the Spirit descended on Jesus as he rose from the waters of the Jordan, he went forth into the world to heal the sick, to set free the oppressed, and to proclaim that the time of God's favor had arrived. In our baptisms, you call us your beloved ones and send us forth to be your presence in the world. Renew in us the grace of our baptism so that we may reflect ever more faithfully the life and ministry of Jesus in our world. Amen.



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