

I have a box with papers in it. It's a good sized box and it's mostly full. A stack at least six inches high. Quite heavy, really. And the papers in that box are all the result of the same event: getting a mortgage. Yes, I know I should probably keep them somewhere more secure and organized than a random cardboard box. But I just really don't want to look at that stack of forms ever again.

Mortgage paperwork is a nightmare of fine print and signatures. My favorite was the paperwork I had to sign regarding the Federal Paperwork Reduction Act. I'm getting a headache just thinking about it again.

But I understand why it's necessary. Well, maybe not that particular one. But in general, I get why they have so many forms to sign. Because they are handing me a lot of money. And I am making a promise to pay them back. A big promise. A promise worth thousand and thousands of dollars.

Promises come in all shapes and sizes. "Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" "Do you promise to keep her in sickness and in health?" "Do you promise to support and defend the Constitution of the United States?" There are lots of promises in this life.

There's also a lot of broken promises in this life. Which is why banks make you sign stacks of paperwork to get a mortgage. Why so many marriages fail. Why so many politicians resign in disgrace. Why justice is so hard to find sometimes.

We are sinners. And for that reason, we are not good at keeping promises. "Adam... do not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil." "I won't God. I promise." "Cain... take care of your brother, Abel. I will God. I promise." "People of Israel... do not worship any other gods." "We won't God. We promise."

We are awful at keeping promises. And the history of the Bible is written proof of it. So it's not surprising that we're a little hesitant to believe others when they make us a promise. We know how untrustworthy we are. And for that reason, I think, deep down, we're a little gun-shy about trusting others too. Even when the one we're supposed to be trusting is God himself.

We see that a little bit in our Gospel lesson today. Here is Mary, hearing the most amazing, confusing, utterly unbelievable thing that any person has ever heard in all of human history. Something that is seemingly so impossible that the angel concludes it all by saying, "I know what you're thinking. But remember... nothing is impossible with God."

And Mary responds, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." In other words, "Alright God, I'll do whatever you tell me to do... but you better keep your promise."

Which at first glance is kind of an odd thing to say. I mean, is Mary really saying, "Yay! I really hope God follows through on this so that I can explain to my fiancée how I'm miraculously pregnant and hope that he doesn't leave me to raise this child alone."

No. That's not the promise that Mary is referring to here. She's referring to the promise that this child will be the Savior. The king of Israel. The Son of God.

She's telling Gabriel. "OK. I'll do this. But this kid better be as important as you're saying he is. God better follow through on this promise. Because that's the only way this is all going to be worth it."

Mary demonstrated a remarkable trust in God's promises. But even she seems a tad skeptical about all this. Even she needs to run to see her cousin Elizabeth immediately after this and confirm that, yes, Elizabeth is miraculously pregnant as well, just like the angel said she would be.

And who can blame her. In a world full of broken promises. In a world where we ourselves are constantly guilty of breaking our promises. It would have been more unusual if Mary hadn't been a tad hesitant to believe the angel.

And yet, when we look at God's Word, and we look at all of the promises that God has made throughout history, we'll quickly find that suspicion and doubt aren't warranted. God doesn't just demand our faith and trust. He's earned our faith and trust. In fact, Gabriel's message to Mary itself points to a promise that God was in the very midst of fulfilling through the coming of Jesus.

It's found in our Old Testament lesson today. In this passage, David is planning to build a grand Temple for the Lord. Up until then, the Ark of the Covenant still resided in the Tabernacle, a large tent, where it had traveled for all those years with the Israelites after they left Egypt and conquered Canaan.

But now, the conquest of Canaan is pretty much finished. Jerusalem, the most heavily fortified city in the region, has been captured and David has built his palace there. It's time to give the Ark of the Covenant a permanent home.

Nathan, the king's chief prophet, thinks it's a great idea initially. But then God comes to him, and says, "No. Not yet. There's no hurry. I don't need a home. That was never my goal. In fact, it was quite the opposite. My goal was to fulfill my promise to give you a home. And I've fulfilled that promise. Focus on that."

And God would make yet another promise that day. He says to David, "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."

It wasn't enough of a gift for God to give David a kingdom that would last for a single lifetime. God promised to give David a kingdom that would last forever. That he would give David a son who would sit on his throne for all eternity. And build a temple for the Lord that would endure forever.

I don't know what David thought about God's promise that particular day. He probably thought that promise would be fulfilled in his son Solomon. And, to a degree, it was. Solomon did sit on David's throne. And he did end up building the Lord's Temple.

But God had something much greater in mind when he made that promise. God doesn't say that he's going to establish your throne "forever" unless he means "forever." If there's anyone who understands the meaning of "forever," it's the Lord God Almighty.

That's what he promises. And that's what he fulfills in Jesus. Gabriel says of Jesus, "*And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*"

Not a kingdom like we think of it, of course. As Jesus himself says to Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this earth." Nor could it be. Because earthly kingdoms end. All of them. Earthly kingdoms crumble under the weight of broken promises. They are crushed by corrupt sinful human beings. Who can't do anything eternal.

We are mortal and temporary. We are born, we live, we die. And everything we make has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And that would be an utterly hopeless way to live. Knowing without a doubt that everything you build – your very life itself – will one day crumble into dust.

If it weren't for the fact that we have an eternal God. Who keeps his eternal promises to us. And gives us something eternal. Makes us something eternal. A heavenly kingdom that will have no end.

That's what we are. That's what the Church is. We are the eternal kingdom of God. This earth will pass away. All the kingdoms of this earth will pass away. All the mortal lives of humanity will pass away.

But God's Word of promise will remain forever. God's Word living in us. Remaking us through baptism. Reviving us through the Lord's Supper. Reassuring us through the forgiveness of sins. In your sinfulness, you are mortal and temporary. But by God's power and grace, you are eternal.

And you serve an eternal Lord, Jesus Christ. Who will indeed sit on the throne of David forever. Who gives us a home where we will dwell forever. Who gives us rest from all our enemies. Who is indeed our Temple. The place where God dwells.

Like Gabriel once said to Mary, so God says to each of us, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you." And he has promised to be with us always, to the very end of the age. Amen.