INRODUCTION

Have you been watching the Olympics? As the athletes skated around the ice or skied down the slopes, the announcers shared the competitors’ stories of past victories and challenges and the current potential they brought to those international games. Some were accurately predicted winners, and others won by surprising upsets. Some of the athletes were veterans of the rigor and stress of such high-level competition and had already earned many medals, while others were young and full of hopes of bronze, silver, and gold to come—if not in PyeongChang in 2018, then in another place in a future year. For those who had devoted their lives to their sport, there was and still is so much promise.

Promise is important to Olympians, in more ways than one. Did you know that the Olympics began in the opening ceremony with a promise? In English, the promise went like this:

In the name of the athletes,
in the name of all judges,
in the name of all the coaches and officials,
we promise to take part in these Olympic Games,
respecting and abiding by the rules and in the spirit of fair play.
We all commit ourselves to sport without doping and cheating.
We do this, for the glory of sport, for the honor of our teams
and in respect for the Fundamental Principles of Olympism.¹

Olympic athletes, coaches, and judges aren’t the only ones who make promises, of course. We all make small promises on a regular basis and big promises on special occasions. And today’s scripture reading reminds us that—ever since the time of Abraham in the Old Testament, and even before that—God was making promises. This morning, I invite you to dig into Paul’s letter to the Romans chapter 4. It isn’t a super easy text to get your mind around. Few of Paul’s writings are. But, like the Olympians have to work hard for their victories, let’s apply ourselves here and see what we can learn about the promise of God.
We find our first clue about the promise of God in Romans 4:13, where Paul writes that the promise of God doesn’t come through the law. This was a pretty radical concept for the Jewish people who first heard or read Paul’s message. Even though they themselves were descendants and heirs of God’s promise given to Abraham, the law given through Moses had apparently been a bigger factor in shaping their religious views.

Some Bible scholars think that Abraham lived around the year 1800 BCE, and Moses lived about 1500 BCE. In those years Before the Common Era, or before Christ, the Jews had become a people of the law. Besides the famous “Ten” Commandments, there are many other commandments written in the Jewish law books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In the third century after Christ, one rabbi famously counted all the laws in the Torah and came up with the number 613.

In the first century in which Jesus and the disciples lived, Jews were trying in varying degrees to uphold as many of God’s laws as they could. And, as you may remember, there was a Jewish man named Saul who was so zealous about enforcing the Jewish law, that he was a leader in the persecution of early Christians. Acts 8:3 tells us that “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house. Dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.”

Saul’s violent actions against the Christians continued until his Damascus Road conversion. Then he was renamed Paul, and he became the world’s most famous Christian missionary. After his conversion, the Apostle Paul came to understand and teach that, while the Jewish law had much value, the law was not equivalent to or on the same level with God’s promise. So, here, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul was writing that the promise of God isn’t about strict obedience to rules and regulations. The law was a useful tool, but only in subservience to the promise of God.

I think we can understand this by thinking about our own laws that we have today. We have many laws that are very useful and important. But we have to admit that our laws were made in
response to problems and situations of the past that may have changed. I haven’t heard much about managing obsolete laws since I’ve lived here in Utah, but I remember one year in Colorado, when the state legislature eliminated a whole bunch of laws from the horse and buggy days that no longer had any relevance. Old laws very often stay on the books way past their time of usefulness, and new laws that would be more useful are usually slow in coming. A promise is inherently future-oriented, while the law tends to look backward. That’s why Paul asserts that the promise of God doesn’t come through the law.

2—THE PROMISE COMES BY FAITH

Instead, says Paul in verse 16, the promise of God comes by faith. Faith is superior to the law, says Paul, because—while the law was created in a certain historical setting for a certain set of people in a certain cultural or religious tradition—faith is available for everyone. The Jewish law was established for God’s Hebrew children, but faith is for all of God’s children all over the world.

Paul was a missionary around the northern Mediterranean, and he was learning and teaching what all the best missionaries have discovered. When the message of salvation is taken to a new set of people, we shouldn’t first require them to give up their culture and laws and take on the new burden of our culture and laws. The first thing we should do is offer them the gift of salvation through faith. Faith is something that anyone can have. Faith is a gift of grace that comes directly from God.

Did you ever see the 1997 Spielberg movie Amistad? That movie tells the true story of a particular set of African slaves that were packed into the hold of a ship named the Amistad. The slaves who survived that torturous ocean crossing were then locked up in an American jail until they could be sold to the highest bidders. At that point, the movie notes the efforts of some Christians to help the slaves in their horrible plight.

There is one scene in which some of the slaves were looking at an illustrated Bible the Christians had given them. The Africans couldn’t read the English words, but they looked at the pictures and deduced that Jesus was someone like them. He had been beaten and imprisoned. He was fastened to
what looked like a ship’s mast, and there he had died. The slaves could believe, not because they understood or obeyed all the laws of the Old Testament, but because, by the faith and grace that God had given them, they could relate to this one who had suffered like them. And then they turned the page and saw a picture of Jesus raised from the dead. To those slaves, this was the promise of God, which gave them hope for their own future. This was the promise of God which allowed them to look forward to life beyond their prison bars and chains. This was the promise of God which came by faith.

3—THE PROMISE COMES THROUGH GOD’S POWER

“OK,” you say. “I’m with you so far. But then I’m confused. If salvation isn’t dependent on the law, and people can find God’s promise by means of faith that comes to them directly from God, then what does anyone need the church for? What do we need Christianity for?”

I’m so glad you asked. The church and Christianity still have an important role to play because, as Paul indicates in verse 21, the promise of God comes through God’s power. And the Judeo-Christian stories of Abraham and Jesus so clearly demonstrate God’s power at work. That God could produce nations from Abraham’s old and nearly-dead body and that God could raise up Jesus who was 3-days dead in the tomb prove to us that God is no wimp. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:20, “God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to God’s power that is at work within us.”

When we, the church, give evidence of that power of new life, then we help convey the promise of God. When we, the followers of Jesus Christ, demonstrate how we have overcome the death of sin and have risen to a new life of hope, we offer promise to those around us. We help those who identify with Abraham and Sarah’s old-age despair to rejoice in the promise that goes beyond them to their children’s children. We help those who identify with the injustice and suffering of Jesus to see that there is a God who has the power to lift them up. The promise of God comes not through the law, but by faith in the power of God.
CONCLUSION

Everything the Apostle Paul and I have said so far in this sermon is pretty abstract. In some ways that’s good. It’s like the promise of God that rises above the specifics of laws. But when Paul wrote about the law, he and his readers assumed some details. In the first century, the Jewish laws of particular concern were rules about circumcision, Sabbath observance, and dietary limitations. In this particular moment in which we live, the laws of most concern might be related to violence in our society.

In my reading of United Methodist news this week, I saw that Catherine Kuhns, a member of Coral Springs United Methodist Church in Florida, accompanied some students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School to the Florida legislature one week after the Valentine’s Day shooting at their school. Ms. Kuhns, who had been a teacher to some of those students, described them as “formidable” and “change agents.” In regard to their idealistic and unconventional insistence on speaking with political leaders, Ms. Kuhns said, “[The students] are not playing by political rules because they don’t know political rules. They have data in their heads and passion in their hearts.”

Whatever you might think the answer to school shootings is, you can see the promise of God in these students who want to bring an end to carnage and violence. They don’t want to be bound by old laws that haven’t been effective in keeping kids and adults safe. The promise of God comes by faith that there is something better that God wants for us and for our future. For those of us who have been around the block a few times, it’s hard to be optimistic that anything will change. But the promise of God will come through God’s power to work miracles. Just as God made it possible for elderly Abraham and Sarah to have a baby, just as God raised Jesus from the dead, and just as God converted the Jewish law-enforcer Saul into the Christian missionary Paul, surely even this intractable problem of mass violence in America has an answer. Maybe, just maybe, this could be the next big example of the promise of God.

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1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympic_Oath
2 http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/united-methodist-supports-teens-lobbying-florida-lawmakers?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTnpnME9EVmxOREF4WVdaclNhQldIM3muaVhka3owZ29UVRlReWwoCfGzRzMDZcZz12VmvWtrvYJBfNJZzU3azxvuRzeZtZyFVRKo60WcSGaRWo0jTRZbLwweHWzZzWcWwIdNGMKXmzquUocC71c2rXMEJ1MiB1jUKieW0tWz0xXFBdZx9N5N5yX6C5VXUuceljR%3D%3D