The Axe is Laid to the Root Already

God's promises work despite the rational of mankind. If you're looking for a theme statement for the sermon, there it is. God's promises work despite the rational of man. It applies to the text this week in two ways. First, God promised Abraham many descendants, sometimes saying they will be a numerous as the stars sometimes as numerous as the sand. And, second, John does not modify his preaching or his message to suit the ears of the Pharisees and Sadducees knowing that the preaching of God's Word will fulfill its purpose with or without human rational.

Let's go in order today. There are two Scriptural moments where God's promise to Abraham is challenged by reason. Let's review the promise first. The reason that Abraham's descendants are so important to the narrative of salvation is this: Jesus was promised as Abraham's offspring. Now, the vast amount of offspring that Abraham would receive is not indicative of a great nation but rather the universality of God's promise to mankind: that all may receive the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life through Christ's donation of himself to mankind.

The first challenge to this promise comes when God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac – the only son through whom this promise could be fulfilled. Abraham's son Ishmael was born outside of the promise of God. So, without an heir, Abraham's descendants never have the chance to exist. Paul in Hebrews explains the

problem like this:

> *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten [son], of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God [was] able to raise [him] up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.*[1]

Despite the impossibility of the promise being fulfilled by a dead son, Abraham, in Faith, carried out the action God commanded him. This is the first challenge of the promises of God by the physical world or the reason of mankind.

Now, the second is like it: John's preaching makes clear that God is ready to destroy the Hebrews for their unfaithfulness. Now, in the face of this, the Hebrews, like children who think they hold all the cards and have one up on God, are not afraid of their destruction. Not because they have faith that God will be merciful but because they think that God cannot accomplish salvation without them.

John breaks that fantasy in two. Remember Isaac, whom Abraham was going to sacrifice? God didn't need a living boy to make offspring for Abraham. God doesn't need the Hebrews to produce the savior or to give Abraham myriad descendants. John goes so far as to say,

> *"and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as [our] father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*[2]

God doesn't need them, they don't have a safety blanket in their genealogy. From the very stones, God can raise up children for Abraham.

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1 Heb. 11:17-19, NKJV.
2 Matthew 3:9, NKJV.

What are the stones? Well, it could be literal stones, rocks. It could be the stones on the bank of the Jordan river. But, what John is likely talking about are the gentiles. The Hebrews would deride the gentiles by calling them *stones*. Why? Because they worshiped Idols made from stones and wood. So, mankind is like that which he worships: gentiles are like stones. And, you, if you worship which here means serve yourself, are the worst version of yourself: a sort of myopic black hole of worthlessness. Got it?

Its a dangerous game. Its the game that the Hebrews had been playing for years. Instead of seeing Christ in the Old Testament or the promises of the Prophets, they saw only themselves. So, they became the worst version of themselves. Or, as John says, an orgy of vipers. Gross. Because of this wickedness, John says, the axe is already laid to the root. That is, our Gideon, the feller of the tree of Jacob, Jesus Christ Himself is ready to chop down the rotten olive tree of Israel.

Should this happen, God will raise from the stones, from the gentiles, from the likes of you, dear Christian, new children for Abraham. Paul has two explanatory passages on this topic: Of the children of Abraham he writes,

> *just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore know that [only] those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, [saying], "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who [are] of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.*[3]

3 Gal. 3:6-9, NKJV.

And, of the Gentiles being grafted into the Faith he writes,

> *For if the firstfruit [is] holy, the lump [is] also [holy]; and if the root [is] holy, so [are] the branches. And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, [remember that] you do not support the root, but the root [supports] you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in." Well [said]. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in [His] goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who [are] natural [branches], be grafted into their own olive tree?*[4]

It is a dangerous game in human life to be haughty toward God. There is no security in human life in anything apart from Christ. A successful life, a full life, a meaningful life, these things are only found in Christ and abound in the life of those who are connected to the vine of eternal life. Delusion is the fruit of those who find themselves outside of Christ in their own security. Its not a great game to play with God.

So, this brings us to the second challenge to reason in the text, John does not preach very kindly to the Pharisees or Sadducees who come to be baptized. In modern, technical church terms – that I find incredibly foolish – you would say he was not very *seeker friendly*. That means, he was not bending and compromising the Church or her teaching for the new members, the ones who were interested in joining, or for the passerby. What does this teach us?

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4 Rom. 11:16-24, NKJV.

Well, John was not *being mean* to the Pharisees and Sadducees simply because he did not like them. But, similarly to your pastor, he was commissioned by God to preach God's Word and God's Word alone. So, the warning with which he addressed these seemingly faithful Hebrews was not out of place. Just like the Father in heaven, no minister of the Gospel of God desires that someone be lost to the kingdom because of ignorance. For too many years this has been happening in our Churches. We have softened the teaching, softened the rebuke, and softened the barrier between the things that are holy and the things that are profane so that hoards of people can join "the church."

"God loves you just as you are," is the kind of message these Churches proclaim. "All that matters is that you trust Jesus as your personal savior." Bologna. That's not Christian preaching. That's not Christian doctrine. And, what does that mean? Why would that actually matter.

I'd like you to think about it this way:

> *So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper [in the thing] for which I sent it.*[5]

These Words God speaks through His servant Isaiah, also a prophet, like John. To change God's word is to make it man's word. To feel the need to change God's word is to trust your own wisdom more than the wisdom and power of God. It is not man's

5 Isaiah 55:11, NKJV.

word that converts hearts and creates faith, brothers and sisters, it is God's word.

So, in service to salvation, John does not soften the teaching of God. In service to salvation, your pastor does not soften the word of God. Man's word is worthless in the pursuit of wholeness and healing; God's word is sufficient in itself to effect in man salvation.

So, to address the previous statements: "God loves you as you are," is wrong because God's love of the individual is transformative. God loves the individual so that they have the chance to hear the preaching of Christ, repent of their sins and be made whole by receiving Christ. God desires that you be changed and healed, not self-confident and indifferent toward righteousness. "All that matters is that you trust Jesus as your personal savior," is incomplete also. To trust in Christ is to believe His word, all of it, to teach others that word, to repent of your sins and leave off of your vices, to be regular in Church receiving the teaching and the sacraments. The beginning of Faith is trust in the promises, that beginning forms the life that follows, and the conclusion of that first trust is a peaceful rest in the grave. But, a flippant trust of Christ is not faith, it's not all that matters. This is why the Apostles so frequently urge Christians to add to their Faith knowledge, virtue, piety, and perseverance!

Here we arrive at the core of the matter, the Christian evangelist proclaims Christ and his saving promises. He also warns of the coming destruction. John

preaches Christ. John is the last of the Old Testament prophets, the last one to point to Christ before Christ's being revealed in the flesh. He's wearing the uniform of Elijah, the camel hair and leather belt, he's eating the food of the prophet, its all there to signify his identity. But the thing that really gives him away is his preaching.

Once again, God has sent a prophet to call Israel to repentance, so that they may be prepared for Christ's preaching. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire. Everyone who does not repent and receive Christ's Baptism cannot hope to bear good fruit.

Remember the analogy of the tree. A man or woman who is not grafted into Christ has no life in them. God's preaching to you, God's baptizing you, is His grafting you into Christ that you might not be a fruitless branch, but bear fruit abundantly. For the Christian this is a great comfort. They do not have to fear the judgment of Christ, for they have already been pardoned of their sins. They have begun, in their new life, to bear the fruit of repentance.

However, to lose all fear of God's judgment is foolish, as Paul says, "*Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in [His] goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.*" The Pharisees and Sadducees desiring John's baptism were like baby Christians, still mired in their

own sin and idolatry. The fear of God motivated them to repent and bear fruit. Sometimes, in the Christian life of repentance, the only thing that keeps us from sin is our fear of punishment. The fear of God's judgment keeps us honest about ourselves and our desires. That fear, the fear of God's wrath and his punishment on unbelief, idolatry, and sin, is a leveling kind of thing.

What I mean is this: your flesh will try to fight that fear for a time. And, eventually it will realize that it cannot win. Why? Well, Christian, you have received the Holy Spirit and it uses your conscience to convict you of your sin with this goal: that you would repent and return to Christ. Now, the flesh, in fighting the fear of God is attempting to get rid of the Holy Spirit. So you, in your life, have two options: 1) repent and believe the Gospel, leave off of your empty works and cooperate with the Holy Spirit in bearing fruit befitting repentance. Or, 2) struggle against the Holy Spirit, continue in sin, live in fear, and eventually, commit such great sin that the Holy Spirit flees you entirely and Christ with "His winnowing fan in His hand will thoroughly clean the threshing floor... burning the chaff with unquenchable fire."[6]

This is why the Christian life is one of constant repentance and prayer. The greatest enemy in your life is your flesh and there is no escaping it until it is finally put down by Christ and laid in the tomb to await its purification in the resurrection. Seriously! It is every human being's constant struggle to submit to the Holy Spirit and

6 Matthew 3:12, paraphrase.

resist the flesh. It is not a battle that can be won without the power of Christ.

That power is available to you. Remember, John says this about Christ:

> *"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*[7]

Those who receive Faith in Christ through the preaching of God's Word, those who receive the Holy Spirit through Christ's Baptism have been received by God and do not need to fear the judgment – this is the solution to fear. It is the flesh, the Old Adam, the flesh you were born with before your baptism that must fear for it, and all its works, will be destroyed. As Paul writes,

> *Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts.*[8]

At Christ's Advent, His final coming, the last day, it will be revealed to you that He has been your shield, He has been your life, He has covered your sin and the Father is ready to receive you into paradise. So, as we wait, let us repent and put off all idolatry and self-confidence, knowing that the day of our redemption draws ever nearer. Amen.

Advent 2, Populus Zion

Malachi 4:1-6; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 3:1-12

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7 Matthew 3:11, NKJV.

8 Romans 13:14, NKJV.