

"Father Like Son, Men Like Gods, and Scripture Unbroken"

Psalm 82; John 10:31-42

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Fall has turned to winter in John's gospel, and we saw Jesus last week fending off an ambush staged by the temple authorities on the temple porch, just as Hanukah, old Israel's festival of light was about to open. The aim of the priests and rabbi's, I think, was to get Jesus to declare himself in some way that would allow them to take him in, and to get him off stage before he could hijack the Hanukah festival in some direction they didn't want him to go. And, if what we heard last week was any measure, they were largely successful. They got Jesus talking about himself as a shepherd of the people.

Jesus had already called them, the rabbi's and priests, to follow him in no uncertain terms, "...but," Jesus told them, "you didn't believe because you're not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Jesus made no bones about the fact that he possessed a sort of power that no ordinary human leader could offer anyone. Jesus said about his flock, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

And the reason Jesus gave that people should trust him and follow him was that his Father was his shepherd: "My Father...is greater than all, and no one will snatch them out of My Father's hand." Jesus promised. But then he went on to say that one more thing that gave the authorities the opening they were angling for. "I and the Father are one!" Jesus said. And his putting himself in the same category, claiming to be in the same business as the Almighty is what provoked the leaders of old Israel to pull pavers out of the temple square and to surge toward Jesus to do him in. But Jesus stops them simply by standing his ground and asking a question.

In so many words, "What good work from my Father will you stone me for today?" In other words, is it illegal to help paralytics walk? Are you offended that I got a blind man to see? "No, no!" the crowd answers, "It's for blasphemy! It's what you said about yourself and God!" And, at this point, Jesus dazzles them with an odd text from a brooding psalm from a visionary musician named Asaph, a man who had led worship in David's day, a thousand years before Christ. Asaph had sung in Psalm 82 about Judgment Day, a song that shows the Almighty on the bench, confronting human kings and princes about corruption and injustice.

It was our Call to Worship this morning, and singing what was in bold print was a jury of angels, agreeing with God that human kings and queens and princes were without "knowledge or understanding," that human leaders "walk about in darkness," with the result that, "the foundations of the earth are shaken." So the picture Asaph draws is of God and the angels on Judgment Day reviewing in detail the sad story of human history, the flaming train wreck that life turns into when men and women forget about God and get their hands on more power than their own wisdom and goodness and character has prepared them to handle.

And the most bitter fact of all from God's point of view is that we were made to be so much more than we wound up being, to do so much better than we managed to do. In Asaph's vision, God expresses what high hopes he had for us: "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you!'" When did God ever say that? When he made us in Genesis, God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion..." In Psalm 8, David looked around at the train wreck his own and everybody else's sin had caused and he asked God, "...what is man that you're mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you've made him little lower than the gods and crowned him with glory and honor. You've given him dominion..."

God said to people like you and me, "...you are gods," in Psalm 82, David said about all of us in Psalm 8 that we were made "little lower than the gods." It's confusing because the word "god" in Hebrew can have a number of meanings. Used about the Almighty the word "elohim" simply means God. But Asaph in Psalm 82 and Jesus in John's gospel both use the word "god" to describe us, ordinary physical creatures in whom God placed a spark of heaven. And the point of calling people like us "gods" is to communicate to us that we are more than the eye can see, that the lives we live here and now were meant to point toward heaven.

We are not the end-product of a random, time and chance, evolutionary process. We were created by a wise, good, all-powerful Creator to live out in a modest, miniature way his wisdom, his goodness, his justice and his compassion. Which matters because, in John's gospel, this psalm, this Judgment Day vision is Jesus' last public word to old Israel's leaders. And what Jesus is saying to them is essentially this: You bet I'm one with the Father, and, more to the point, you were supposed to be one with the Father, you were supposed to hold onto to these sheep with that love that makes the Father hold on, you were supposed to lay down your lives with the sort of love that sends a shepherd through the shadows and to the cross, so the sheep can make it safely home.

It is not blasphemy for mere human leaders to want and seek to be one in purpose and intention with the Father, fallen though we are. By his grace, depending on his power, over time, our hearts can be tamed and filled to imperfectly share the oneness with God he gives to those who turn from their sins and throw in with Christ, who is that one human leader who is perfectly one with the Father because, as he taught us today, he is the eternally begotten "...Son of God...whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world."

It follows that all human beings can bear a family resemblance to the Father in heaven because we are all made in his image, so we can all resemble him if we'll only belong to him. But Jesus is the special case, eternally begotten of the Father, he perfectly resembles the Father in a way we can only borrow from him. In a letter to the Corinthians, Paul put it this way, he said, "God made [Christ], who knew no sin, to be sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." We are "gods" in the sense that we fulfill our destiny, we answer our high calling by giving up on ourselves and letting Christ teach us what the Father made us to be.

And it is not to be taken for granted that any of us will be willing to turn from what works for us and learn a different destiny. Incredibly, Jesus had not given up on this proud, stubborn bunch who continued to menace him with their stones and pavers. He appeals one more time; "If I'm not doing the works of my Father, then don't believe me. But if I do them, even though you don't believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father."

Jesus begs them, and us, to keep an open heart, to take time to "know and understand" who he is and what he's calling us to be. The point being that we often don't get what Father and Son are up to in a single swallow. There's all kinds of math involved that we can only learn over time. But if we'll trust him now, let him forgive us now, we can ask him and wait on him to sort out the stuff that's beyond our reach in this moment. It's a huge mistake to think we have to have it all sorted, when Christ is willing to work with us now the way we are.

Mid-Week Devotional Grace and Regeneration

*For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God,
not as a result of works, so that no one can boast.*

Ephesians 2:8,9

On Sunday, we opened our service with Psalm 82, a psalm about Judgment Day in which God reviews human history in light of how "fearfully and wonderfully" he "made" us (Psalm 139:14). Long and short, we have been a huge disappointment, even though we were made to be so much more. God will remind us on Judgment Day, "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you!'" But at the Fall, we came crashing down from those high hopes and so God warns us that, "...like men you shall die, and fall like any prince." (Psalm 82:6,7) That we were made with such a high calling, and yet often find ourselves so far from God and so wrong and evil is hard for the finite mind to embrace. Yet in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul lays out for us God's plan to redeem people like us into what we were meant to be.

He begins by teaching us that, in our natural, fallen state, you and I are "dead" in our "transgressions and sins." (Ephesians 2:1) The technical theological word for our condition is "total depravity". Now, "depravity" doesn't mean that human beings are always and only evil. We all know that's not true. You and I were made in God's image and there's tremendous ability and potential in each of us. What depravity means is that in our natural state people like you and me are totally unresponsive to God. We may do a good thing every now and then, but it's not because we care about God. Depravity means that we do good things when it suits us and we do bad things when it suits us. What's important to sinful humanity is not what God wants, but what suits us. So sin makes us dead to God. In our natural state, the teachings of his Word and the rules of his kingdom don't matter to us.

Instead, we conform our behavior to the ways of the world around us. And that's not good because since the garden of Eden, the devil has been at work influencing people to conform to the law of the jungle. So for the most part, the world system rewards the selfish and the strong and oppresses the gentle and the meek. The only problem with the devil's scenario is that what he considers great, God considers dead. Since the day Adam and Eve fell, this world and it's demonic prince have been consigned to judgment and destruction. That's why Paul tells us that human beings are "by nature...children of wrath." (Ephesians 2:3)

If we do what comes naturally, "wrath" is at the end of the road for us. All the ability and potential God invested in us has been frustrated and corrupted by sin. For every noble deed and great invention, there's a tragic war and a cruel holocaust. All the great accomplishments of humanity are hopelessly compromised by the misguided and corrupting influence of sin. We may think we're terrific, and often we do well, but by God's standards we're worthy only of condemnation and wrath. And God's remedy for human depravity is grace. Jesus Christ is the living expression of God's grace.

Jesus lived, died, rose and ascended to make it possible for undeserving people to find forgiveness, power to change, and eternal life. It follows that you and I don't come to God because we're so smart and good. We believe because God saw our lost and hopeless condition and reached out with grace to open our hearts and minds to the gospel. The technical term for that is "regeneration". We respond to God when his Spirit makes our hearts alive to the gospel. Where once we were far from God, now we feel this hunger to be closer to him, to be more like him. And then it dawns on us. God really loves us. Christ really died so we could be forgiven. And in a moment of decision, we take it all as a gift from God's hand. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, it is not of yourselves, it is a gift from God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast."