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The Gospel of John

XXIX. What Abraham Longed to See

John 8:48-59

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It all began when the religious leaders had thrown down before Him the woman caught in adultery – hoping to catch Him either defying the law of Moses which said that adulterers were to be put to death, or defying the Roman law that only the occupying Roman army could carry out executions. Either way would have worked just fine for the religious leaders – defying the law of Moses would cost Jesus the support of the crowd; defying the Roman law would mean Jesus became a Roman problem. One way or another, Jesus would no longer pose a threat to the position and power of the religious leaders.

But Jesus had threaded the eye of a needle with His response. He had said to the religious leaders, “*Let he who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.*”¹ Thus He upheld the law of Moses in agreeing that the law commanded death by stoning for adultery; but He also kept the Romans at bay by saying that only one without sin could throw the first stone leading to her death. No one there was without sin, of course – more to the point, no one there would ever dare publicly claim to be without sin in front of the crowd. Jesus had escaped their trap. Of course, we are much more taken – and rightly so – by what Jesus then said to this woman: “*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*” She said, ‘*No one, Lord.*’ And Jesus said, ‘*Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.*’² Amazing grace, we call it. The same amazing grace which saves us all.

Well, all of this took place at the very beginning of chapter eight in John’s Gospel. And in the weeks since we read that story, we have been listening in on the great debate which followed. Jesus and the religious leaders have moved from one topic to another – but the basic theme of the debate has been the same on both sides: Jesus claiming, one way after another, to be the One sent from God to save us; and the religious leaders claiming, one way after another, that He is no such thing, but rather a liar, blasphemer, and misleader of the people. These arguments have not been much fun for us to read (even less so for me to preach on!), especially since the points made in these arguments are deeply tied to the particular religious understandings of that time and culture. But in each of these series of arguments, Jesus has revealed to us something more about who He is and what He has come to do for us. In each successive argument, we have seen more and more clearly the glory of our Lord, as well as more and more clearly the unfolding of His purpose and plan to save us.

And this morning, the last of these arguments with the religious leaders stemming from His mercy to the woman caught in adultery, here this morning we really hit the jackpot of Jesus’

revelation to us of His person and purpose. For the first time, Jesus openly claims that He is divine, that He is God in the flesh. And for the first time, He openly describes what He has come to do as being the fulfillment of the covenant God had made with Abraham so very long before. I'm not going to go blow by blow through this morning's dispute. Instead, I want to zero in on these two great revelations contained in Jesus' dispute with the religious leaders.

Let's begin with Jesus' revelation that He is the fulfillment of the covenant God had made with Abraham. The key verse is verse fifty-six, where Jesus says to the religious leaders: "*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day.*" Jesus is saying that He is what the covenant with Abraham was really all about. Now, to be clear what that means, we will need to go back to that covenant, which we find in Genesis 12:1-3. And, for context, we need to go back even before then to recall the events which lead up to Genesis 12:1-3.

So – in Genesis chapters one and two, God creates the heavens and the earth, and places His crowning glory – the only creature made in His image – at the center of His good Creation. In His image meaning made for loving relationship with God, as well as made for loving relationship with our fellow human beings (remember the two greatest commandments according to Jesus – love God and love your neighbor?!). Made for loving relationship with God – but then, Genesis chapter three, humankind instead turns their backs on God and on the goodness of the life He had laid out for them. They decide to live life on their own terms, not His. And then, having broken their relationship with God, they start turning on one another and ruining their relationships with their fellow human beings – Genesis chapter four, the story of Cain murdering his brother Abel in a fit of jealous rage.

And from there on it only gets worse. By the time of Genesis chapter six, the Lord looks down and sees that "*the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord God was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*"³ So how does God respond to the fallenness of His beloved children, who seem bent on destroying the goodness of everything that He has made? God sends a flood over all the earth, sparing only Noah and his family, and of course the animals, two-by-two on the Ark. But when the flood waters recede, while all the humans save for Noah and his family are now gone, still the stain of human sin stubbornly remains – in fact, it doesn't take long for human sin to rev up all over again, more evil than before.

For, by Genesis 11, humankind is trying to build a tower that will reach all the way to heaven – the Tower of Babel. Their goal is to get up into heaven so that they can then throw God out and get rid of Him altogether. Their evil hubris is soon met by a strong dose of divine reality. Their "great" tower is to God in heaven not much more than an anthill – and He tears it down and scatters humankind over all the earth, confusing their language as they go in order that they won't be able to cooperate in their evil so easily in the future.

And then, after the story of the Tower of Babel – the ultimate sin of humankind trying to get rid of God altogether – what happens next? Nothing! A great pregnant pause in the story. Specifically what we get next, at the end of chapter eleven, is a genealogy – the single most boring form of Biblical literature. But here, as so often in the Bible, this genealogy has a significance far beyond the "who begat whoms" – for it is a sign that something big is just about to happen. And

that something big, Genesis chapter twelve, is the covenant God makes with Abraham. God calls down to Abraham and tells him that what's going to happen next is that He, God, is going to make of Abraham and his descendants a great nation. And that He is going to give to them a promised land in which to dwell. And that He is going to bless them above all other peoples on earth with a special relationship with Him. And then comes the kicker, the important part, the point of the whole covenant: God will do all this for Abraham and his descendants in order that, one day, God will bring forth from out of Abraham's descendants One who will bring the blessing of God, the salvation of God, to all the peoples on earth.

This is nothing less than God's great plan for how He is going to save His Creation and His beloved, but rebellious human creatures at the center of His Creation. This is the plan by which God will set everything right that has gone wrong in all the earth and in every human heart. The plan by which human sin against God and against neighbor shall at last be overcome and vanquished once and for all from God's creation. And the whole rest of the Old Testament is basically the story of God fulfilling each one of His promises to Abraham and his descendants. He does indeed make of them a great people – Israel. He does indeed give them a Promised Land in which to dwell, does indeed grant them blessing upon blessing along the way. But all of this is only leading up to the fulfillment of what the covenant with Abraham is really all about – the birth of the One who, from Abraham's lineage, will bring salvation not only to Israel but to all the peoples on earth.

And that is the story of the New Testament, which begins with the birth of a child, a descendant of Abraham, in a tiny village with a huge prophetic significance – Bethlehem.⁴ And that is what is meant when Jesus says to the religious leaders, "*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw and was glad!*" For Jesus is what the covenant with Abraham was all about. Jesus is the fulfillment of that covenant – for Jesus is the promised Savior of all the peoples on earth. Jesus is the One who has come to restore not only the human heart, but all of God's Creation – all things put right forevermore. "*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day*" means nothing less than your father Abraham longed to see this day, this day right in front of you this very moment – this day when the Word would become flesh, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation launched with Abraham in Genesis chapter twelve. And what that means for us is the great assurance of one of my favorite old hymns:

*God is working his purpose out
 As year succeeds to year;
 God is working his purpose out,
 And the time is drawing near;
 Nearer and nearer draws the time,
 The time that shall surely be,
 When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
 As the waters cover the sea.⁵*

But what of the second great revelation in our passage – we said there were two – one to do with Jesus' purpose and the other to do with His person. The second revelation arising out of this dispute with the religious leaders is that Jesus is not only the fulfillment of God's covenant

with Abraham, but that He Himself is actually very God of very God, as we say in the Nicene Creed. That He is not only the descendant of Abraham, but God in the flesh come down to earth – such that when we look at Jesus, we are seeing who God is and what our God is like. In our passage, we find this in verse fifty-eight, where Jesus answers the religious leaders by saying to them, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.*” Listen carefully to the way He phrases that. Not “before Abraham was, I was too” – past tense. But “*Before Abraham was, I am*” – present tense. The use of “I am” here is profoundly significant.

For a little farther along in the Old Testament story of God’s fulfilling His covenant with Abraham, we find Israel in slavery in Egypt. And God chooses Moses to set His people free (they have by now become a great nation – promise to Abraham number one). And not just to set them free, but to lead them to the promised land – promise to Abraham number two. Moses hems and haws before God, despite standing before a burning bush that is not consumed while hearing the voice of God speaking to him from out of the bush. One objection he raises with God is what answer he should give if the Israelites ask him for the name of the God that has sent him. God answers Moses by saying to him, “*Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” “I AM.”*⁶

Now, turn back to verse fifty-eight in our reading this morning. The Jews say to Jesus, “*How could you have ever seen Abraham?*” And Jesus answers them, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.*” “*I AM*” – Jesus is not mixing up His present tense with His past tense. He is revealing to them and to us His true identity: “*I AM*” – the very name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. So Jesus is not just the fulfillment of God’s great plan of salvation sealed in the covenant with Abraham, Jesus is revealing that He Himself is God Himself come to earth in human form, in order to lead all the peoples of earth – a greater Moses! – from out of their slavery to sin and into that greater Promised Land which is the very Kingdom of God. In the Tower of Babel story, we tried to climb up to heaven to get rid of God – but in the Gospel story, the salvation story of the New Testament, God comes down to earth to get rid of our sin and to defeat our death, and in love to save us and to claim us as His beloved children invited to be with Him in heaven forevermore.

Getting a bit ahead of where we are in John’s Gospel, we know that the way He will liberate us from our slavery to sin is through His death on the cross. And the way He will lead us into His eternal Kingdom is through His resurrection from the dead. All of which also harkens back to Abraham – back to that moment when Abraham is leading his son Isaac to an altar hastily built upon Mount Moriah – a place which in Jesus’ day, as well as in our own, is also known as Jerusalem. As they climb the mount, Isaac, Abraham’s only son, asks where they will find a lamb for the sacrifice. And Abraham answers: “*God will provide the lamb, my son.*”⁷ And indeed, that is precisely how God accomplishes our salvation from sin and sets us upon the path to His Kingdom – God provides the lamb. Indeed, the Son of God Himself is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world⁸ by His death on a cross in Jerusalem.

So, this is what Jesus reveals to us this morning in the closing dispute with the religious leaders in chapter eight – first, that in Him God is fulfilling the most important part of the covenant with Abraham, reaching out from this one people Israel to bring the blessing of salvation to all people. To set right at last all that has gone wrong in the human heart, in human history, and in all

of God's Creation because of the human heart and human history. And second, that not only that, but also that Jesus is God Himself in human form – taking the weight of all that great wrongness into and upon Himself, vanquishing it with the greatness of His love for us, removing it with the depth of His mercy towards us, overcoming it once and for all with the power of His own goodness. This is the great good news of the Gospel, that God Himself, in human form, comes down to earth, where we are – that He might then lead us back to where He is in heaven. God loves us so much that comes to do this in person.

And brothers and sisters in Christ – this is our story! This is what our faith is all about. This is what our lives are all about! That in Jesus Christ God fulfilled the promise of salvation He had made with Abraham. And if God has so fulfilled the old covenant of salvation with Abraham, then how deeply may we trust, how surely can we begin to live out of an absolute assurance that God will fulfill the new covenant He has made with us in Jesus Christ – the new covenant that His Kingdom will indeed finally come in completeness. And that He will indeed prepare for us a place in that Kingdom: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.*" Jesus Christ is not only the gift of our salvation, but the promise that God Himself has deeply immersed Himself in our lives, and in the life of this world, forever.

And if God has so deeply immersed Himself in us and in His world, so as to bring about our salvation and the restoration of all things, then we can – with all confidence – deeply immerse ourselves in Him and in His promises. And so live out our days marked by faith and hope and love, marked by peace and joy and gentleness – all stemming from the powerful assurance that we are His and He is ours forever. And that one day all will be revealed, all will be redeemed, all will be made new; and that all things, all things, will be brought round to good.⁹

¹ John 8:7.

² John 8:10-11.

³ Genesis 6:5-6.

⁴ Luke 2:1-20 of course; but also Micah 5:2-5a.

⁵ "God Is Working His Purpose Out," Arthur Campbell Ainger (1894).

⁶ Exodus 3:14.

⁷ Genesis 22:8.

⁸ John 1:29.

⁹ Romans 8:28; Revelation 21:1-5.