

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

People loved by God,

Last week we meditated on the Lord's deliverance of Noah and his family from the flood and ark, and how Noah, in faith, offered a sacrifice in thanks to the Lord.

But, as the Lord had declared, "**the heart of man is evil continually from his youth,**"

we find the next generations already disobeying God's command to spread out over the earth, and instead, in defiance, they built up what would be known as the Tower of Babel.

We find men like Nimrod raising up warrior civilizations like Babylon and Assyria, and people making up false gods of God's blessings (idolatry) and imagining untrue stories to explain the earth's existence and yearly weather cycles, even false narratives about the world-wide flood.

And the lineage from Shem to Abram did not escape this last item, either.

When Joshua admonished the Israelites to **choose for themselves whom they would serve,**

he reminded them that their **ancestors beyond the Euphrates served [false] gods.** Joshua 24:15

But by God's grace, He called Abram (then at the age of 75) out of idolatry to follow only Him.

That day the Lord gave Abram three promises: 1) that He would give Abram the land of Canaan,

2) that He would make Abram into a great nation with countless descendants,

3) and that the world would be blessed through him because the Savior would come from his family.

For 24 years, Abram had waited (sometimes impatiently) for this last promise to be even possible.

Remember that Sarai was barren—so how could God fulfill that promise?

And so, when Abram was 85 years old (10 years after God had initially made His promises)

in weakness, Abram followed Sarai's advice and took Hagar as a surrogate.

Hagar conceived and bore a son and named him Ishmael, as an angel had told her to do.

But what Abram and Sarai had hoped would help God along in His planning, backfired.

When Hagar found that she had conceived, she despised Sarai and that led to a whole other story.

But it also sets up for what we are about to read from Genesis 17,

...as follows in Jesus' name:

And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!"

God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish My **covenant** with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for **Ishmael, I have heard** you; behold, I have **blessed** him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. (ESV)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; **sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth.** Amen.* (John 17:17)

After all those years of waiting (24 to be exact), the time was finally at hand.

But it wasn't in the way that Abram (or Sarai!) had thought it would be.

Years ago, having been given the promise of becoming a great nation,
they would have thought that Sarai would have given birth to a whole clutch of children.
But now, Sarai being 89 and barren, even having one child seemed impossible.
And so when the Lord **changed her name to Sarah** and **promised to bless her...**
and promised that **she would bear a son...** and **she would become nations...**
and that **kings would come from her...**

It was too much for Abraham.

How many months... flowing into years... had he and Sarah been disappointed?

After all that time, was God NOW going to fulfill such a promise?

Why bother with that now... and open old wounds – now long scabbed over?

Especially now since Abraham already had the 13 year-old boy, Ishmael, who could be his heir.

... “See God, I already worked it out. Bless me this way.”

...
That’s kind of what happened in our Gospel text, too.

When John the Baptist started preaching, people were excited about him.

This new guy on the spiritual scene was very different than their normal priests and rabbis.

Here was a true prophet, who didn’t mince words. He knew the Scriptures... and taught them.

He didn’t live a hypocritical life... He obviously, wasn’t a lover of money or fancy things.

“Could this be the one... the promised Messiah (or Christ)? ... or Elijah returned from heaven?

... “See God, it’s already worked it out. Bless us this way.”

And in both cases, with Ishmael and with John, the answer was an unequivocal “NO!”

Ishmael was NOT the son of promise, and John was NOT the promised Savior.

— Two cases of misidentification. — Two cases of hopes focused on the wrong person.

It may be understandable why they would have thought that way, but neither one was correct.

And it’s not that Abraham or the people in John’s day didn’t believe God’s Word.

No, they believed it. They were eagerly expecting the long-awaited fulfillment to God’s promises.

But in both cases, they couldn’t see another way for God to actually fulfill those promises.

...
This isn’t so different from how you and I often struggle in spiritual matters.

God has given us many and great promises.

Promises to be with you... To bless you... To provide for you...

To forgive you... To strengthen you... To protect you... To never forsake you... and the list could go on.

And for some Christians, they can often feel like these promises are being fulfilled on a regular basis.

They don’t usually struggle with doubts of God’s presence,

or fear that He’s ignoring them... or worse: punishing them.

They feel like He is blessing them... and protecting them.

They don’t struggle with great burdens of conscience... and so they don’t doubt God’s forgiveness.

It seems like they have it all together.

And what a blessing when the Lord gives us times when we aren’t struggling with such thoughts/fears.

But it’s also good for Christians to examine themselves and reflect on why they actually feel that way...

because remember, we are of the same blood as all of Adam’s and Noah’s descendants.

and **the intention of our heart**, as God Himself has said, **is evil from our youth.**

Just because we are Christians and believe God’s Word doesn’t mean that we are free

from misidentifying from time to time what gives us peace.
We can just as easily fall into the same disobedience and faithlessness of our ancestors
if we carry false thoughts and ideas of what makes for our comfort and successes and joy.

You can make a false god out of your money, trusting it to secure a good life for you,
and believing promises that having “enough” (whatever that is), would make you content.
And what if you are struggling under mounds of debt, or going paycheck to paycheck?
Does this mean that God is not blessing you?

You can make a false god out of your family and family events,
believing that these are what make for your happiness... these will get you through the difficult days...
...that if you “raise them right”, keep them in line...
or give them the “perfect Christmas” (like a Hallmark movie)...
or get them involved in every activity that can possibly fit into your already-busy life...
then life will be good for you... and you can live happily ever after.
Except, what if it doesn’t go that way... what if nobody seems to care... or doesn’t listen...
or Christmas is going to be a little bit more sparse this year?

But perhaps even more of a temptation for us is misidentifying God’s law as the thing that brings peace.
You can often find this in two general directions:

The **first** is when things are going well... or relatively well.

It seems as if you have your act together. You generally follow the 10 Commandments,
at least not with major or conspicuous violations.

And so, it only seems fair and right that the Lord is blessing you.

The **second** is when things aren’t going well.

Your family is in disarray... the creditors are calling... your sins are evident...
or you’re burdened with hidden struggles and guilt.

Then, it seems obvious that God is angry with you or punishing you or... perhaps worse... ignoring you.
... And perhaps there is a **third** and a **fourth**...

You are doing everything “right”, but still God seems to be upset with you.

Others are doing so much wrong, and God seems to be rewarding them.

But no matter what which direction you are prone to go... you are focusing on the wrong person.

This is where we need God’s firm and unequivocal, “No.”

No matter how much it seems like it should... God’s Law does not give you peace.

It is to serve as a curb — to hold you back from presumptuous sins.

It is a mirror — to show you your past sins, to make them plain and obvious to you (not justify you!).

And it is a guide for you, the Christian, to guard you from future defiling sins
that would burden your conscience more.

The Law is so natural to us.

Its promise of justice is appealing... and we can’t imagine a different way for God to give us peace...

... “See God, I already worked it out. Bless me this way,” we would say.

God’s Law is great — until we break it (or realize that we’ve broken it) — then it’s terrifying,

like **the ax being laid at the root of the tree** and **the winnowing fork** of judgment **in God’s hands**.

But, as the Lord showed Abraham His better promise... the impossible son of promise from Sarah’s body,

and as John pointed to the coming Messiah... the impossible Son, not only of a virgin, but of God Himself, so also the Lord would have you see and identify Jesus as the bringer of true and eternal peace.

Don't get all excited about the wrapping paper & box — don't read the Bible as a "how to" guide book, as if the Law gives peace and is the answer to your aching and burdened heart.

Open up God's word... and see Jesus as the Fulfiller of the Law.

He is the One (and only One) whose intention of His heart was never evil.

He is the One (and only One) for whom money and family were seen only as the blessings they are, and never misidentified them as the giver and source of His happiness.

He is the One (and only One) who did not try to show God how He worked it all out, demanding that God bless Him in His own desired way.

Open up God's Word... and see in Jesus the fulfillment of God's all-but-impossible promises:

of forgiveness: through the blood of atonement poured out for you from Jesus' (the true Christ's) veins;

of God's gracious presence: through the same body and blood descended from Abraham and Sarah,

conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, our Emmanuel (God with us);

of God's strength: as we prayed for just moments ago, *Stir up Your power, O Lord and Come,*

and help us with Your great might, that whatever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished

by Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, Your Son our Lord;

of God's blessings: to provide for our temporal and eternal welfare and to protect us from the evil one, whose tyranny over you has been crushed;

of God's never forsaking you: you whom He has washed and clothed and given His holy name and called His holy and precious child and heir of eternal paradise with Him.

The angels announced it correctly to the shepherds when they identified Jesus as God's "Peace on earth."

This Christmas, and quite frankly, today and everyday God invites you to unwrap His gift to you this seemingly-impossible, yet completely-true promised Son, Jesus Christ, your laughter, comfort & joy.

The Lord is at hand. Philippians 4:5. Thanks be to God!

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria