

Sermon – “To Raise Up From These Stones”

Scripture: Ezekiel 36:22-28, Matthew 3:1-12

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Our first reading visits ancient words of prophecy, spoken to the people of Israel during a time of exile in the 6th Century B.C., and containing simultaneously both reprimand and a hopeful promise of restoration. Hear now these words from Ezekiel chapter 36, verses 22 through 28:

22 *Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. 23 I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes.*

24 *I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.*

28 *Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. Amen.*

Let us turn to the Gospel according to Matthew. Listen now for the word of the Lord to you in these words from Matthew 3, verses 1 through 12:

1 *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"*

4 *Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

7 *But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

11 *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: “To Raise Up From These Stones”

Text: “I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” Matthew 3:9b

From the stones of the earth, John says, God is able to raise up children to Abraham. In one line John yanks away the entire basis of his listeners’ self-regard. He has given out a sharp challenge— bear fruit! — and he anticipates the response: “Didn’t God make a promise to our ancestor Abraham of the greatness of his children? Aren’t we those very children, the people who can proudly hold ourselves up as the inheritors and fulfillers of that promise?”

“No,” he answers. “We can do no such thing. God’s promises have no need of us at all,” John very bluntly assures his hearers. It is not by us that God’s will must be fulfilled. Our own powers or stations of birth are irrelevant, our pride out of place, for God can do with pebbles what we think depends on us, can accomplish with mere rock those functions for which we assign ourselves great importance.

Truth be told, if we are completely honest about human nature, about our own nature, we might reasonably conclude that from God’s point of view, mere rock is, in fact, rather easier to work with. Rock, after all, is not nearly so rebellious. It does not choose sin over righteousness, evil over good, as we do regularly. Certainly, it does not choose anything at all; it is rock. It just sits there. But it has sat there, doing what it does, one might say in perfect obedience to God’s command to rock, for a good deal longer than we have been around, so we might learn a few things from it.

To speak of the stones obeying God’s command in this way might sound a little odd, since doing nothing but sitting there is just what rock does naturally. And yet, of course, in a world where every particle was created by God, and the laws according to which they move were invented by God, “what objects do naturally” vs. “what God has commanded them to do” may be a distinction without a difference. Stone does what stone does, just as water does what water does, gravity does what gravity does, and light does what light does, all of these according to the way of the universe which was spoken into being through the Word of God. The stones of the earth, then, may be inanimate, but they are not insignificant. They are because God willed them to be, and they do what God wills them to do, fill the role that God wills them to fill.

And the role we have largely seen them fill in relation to us humans, Biblically speaking, is that of witness. The stones last through many ages; they are ideal agents of lasting testimony. It is no accident that God wrote the commandments given to Moses on stone.¹ Jacob set up a stone to mark forever the place where he had his vision of a ladder to heaven.² Later, he and his father-in-law set up stones as witnesses that they would not pass beyond that place to harm each other.³ Stones were set up as a durable declaration of God’s deliverance of Israel across the river Jordan.⁴ In Luke, as Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem to joyful shouts, some Pharisees told him to quiet the crowd, to which he replied, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”⁵ The stones are a testament. They bear witness to truth, even where people do not.

¹ See Exodus 24:12-18, 31:18, 34:1-4, and 34:27-29.

² Genesis 28:10-22.

³ Genesis 31:43-54.

⁴ Joshua chapter 4.

⁵ Luke 19:28-40. Quote is from Luke 19:40 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

And if the stones are witnesses for truth, then they are, alas, witnesses against us. For written on stone is the law, and which of us has not transgressed the law? Silently the stones sit in their ceaseless obedience beside our every disobedience; they see our every wrong.

What do people make of stone? We raise buildings out of stone. We build walls out of stone. But Habakkuk tells us that every stone of every building and wall can be a testament against the violence and evil upon which we have built what Augustine called the City of Man. Idols are made of stone, and their eternal silence testifies against our worshipping the products of our own hands. Revelation speaks of the greatness, in human terms, of the evil city that will be overthrown, its riches and its multitudes of precious stones, and how they come to naught— those rare, shiny, glittering, precious stones do not testify to our success, but to our serving wealth rather than God.⁶ Whether they remain silent or cry out, whether they sit in the walls we build or rise up as children of Abraham, the stones of the earth are witnesses against us.

And by “us,” I mean precisely that. There are scriptural passages we can evade as applying to others, preferably the ones too lazy to show up in church, but not the passage we have heard today. This is one case where “preaching to the choir” is exactly what is called for. The passage is written to everybody, but most directly and pointedly at us, the people who are regular churchgoers, leaders, preachers, those of us who already identify ourselves as Christians. For who are singled out and called “vipers” here? The Pharisees and the Sadducees. And who were they? They were not the people least attentive to religion; they were the people most attentive to religion. And lest we think they correspond to some particular set of churchgoers other than our own, we must take note that the Pharisees and the Sadducees were different from one another as Bible Belt conservatives and Social Gospel liberals.⁷ But one thing they had in common; they were the people sitting in the pews and the chancels, not the unchurched masses.

So we, of all people, cannot take John’s warning lightly. We cannot rest assured in our being here, our following the rules, our leading the Bible studies, our putting money in the offering plate. We may be the people of the church, but God does not need us, as John reminds us. God can raise up children to Abraham from the stones.

And yet, God does want us. John may have been rebuking the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but he was not proclaiming to them a destiny of perdition; he was calling for their repentance to be real and full. Bear fruit, he said. Yes, it comes with a fearful warning, but a warning implicitly contains a message of hope. What is the hope? The same as the warning: God is able to raise up. God is able to raise up.

God is able to raise up from these stones others who will be the children of the covenant, yes— but God has already raised us up from the dust of the earth, and this prophecy from John is not finished judgment upon us but a call to action, a call to be ourselves those children of the covenant.

Surely, coming as it does with such a warning, this is a fearful call. Paul wrote, “All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: ‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one.’”⁸ “All have turned aside,” he says, “Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to

⁶ See Revelation 17-18.

⁷ The Sadducees were well-represented among the higher classes and priests, believed only in the written law, and did not believe in resurrection after death. The Pharisees were known for their careful and strict adherence to the law, and believed that the secondary tradition of interpretation of scripture was binding as law as well.

⁸ See Romans 3:9-20. (Quotes are from the *NRSV*).

deceive.’ ‘The venom of vipers is under their lips.’” We are all sinners, and we cannot rest assured in calling ourselves the people of God. We must bear fruit, for the one is coming, and his winnowing fork is in his hand.

But what of this one? John predicts this terrible, fearful one to follow, and whom did we get? Jesus. Jesus, who got angry to be sure, but who, rather than judging and cutting down, separating wheat from chaff and calling down fire from heaven, was meek and forgiving, who submitted to suffering. Is this the same guy John was talking about?

Jesus himself gives us a clue in a parable about a man who had a fig tree and ordered it cut down when it bore no fruit. The gardener offered, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”⁹ Even in Jesus’ own sayings, we see plenty of warning about the judgment to come. But first Jesus himself has come bringing forgiveness, breaking our captivity, and sending us the Holy Spirit. There may be no one righteous, not even one, but the story is not over until grace is added in. We must bear fruit, and by the restorative power of God, we can. God is able to raise up.

But when John the Baptist says that God is able from the stones of the earth to raise up children to Abraham, this is not just a personal warning with a personally hopeful implication. It is also a statement about the source and nature of the people of God as a whole. And if he is speaking especially to those of us in this room, the religious ones, the elders, the deacons, the seminary-educated preachers, then to us this is also a reminder of something about the entire body of the church and how to understand our role in it. Indeed, for those of us finding ourselves, as so many do these days, in big stone houses of worship with now small congregations, wondering what we can do to bring back the people to the church, the idea that “from these stones” God can raise up a people can actually be a source of hope and relief.

“God does not need us” is scary, humbling, and freeing. Scary, because it comes as a warning. Humbling, because it deflates in us any ability whatsoever to point to the work of God’s kingdom and think it could not or would not be accomplished if not for us. It reminds us that we cannot believe God has chosen us for some purpose because of who we are; rather, God created us who we are having first chosen us for some purpose.¹⁰ And freeing?

Freeing, because without the prideful notion that it is we who hold together God’s church and that the future of the church depends specifically on us, our hopes are no longer dependent on our own power to bring about success, but on the promise that God can raise up great things, even in the most dire situations imaginable, even from that which appears stone-dead. And thank God for this. It is not our perfect, sinless example that will save the church, not our own power to change people’s hearts, not our own grand vision or capacity for conforming the church to it. We are relieved of the duty of being the source of the church’s life, and without anxious fear that its existence depends on our competence and perfection we are left able simply to do the work of earnestly and diligently serving that church with eager faith in God’s power to raise up.

God is the architect and the builder. We ourselves are lifted up—praise God—and set in our places with the job of carrying weight in one, small, particular section of wall. We cannot see the walls being

⁹ See Luke 13:1-9 and particularly 13:6-9. (Quotes are from the *NRSV*.)

¹⁰ Jeremiah’s call as a prophet, in chapter 1 of the book of Jeremiah, is a particularly clear example of this concept, being not chosen for one’s abilities or identity, but having abilities and identity that are formed by God’s call.

built up in every other part of the building. Nor can we always recognize when certain structures are torn down because they were meant to be temporary supports only during construction, or because in the final renovation they will be built anew. But we need not fear that their coming down means in the end nothing will remain but ruins. From these stones God can, and will, raise up children to Abraham.

We should absolutely take to heart the warning of John. We should sincerely humble ourselves, repent, bear fruit befitting repentance. For long have the stones been witnesses against us. Stones, in our hands, have been weapons of violence. Stones, as our hearts, have stood unmoved at the need of our neighbors. Stones, under our feet, have silently watched our every sin. But as surely as God is able to raise up from these stones [under our feet], God is also able to raise up from these stones [in our breasts].

“I will sprinkle clean water on you,” God promises the people of Israel in Ezekiel, even while reminding them of their failures, “and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”¹¹ Such is the power and promise of God. Being raised up in this way, we too, even more than the stones, will be a witness to truth. 2 Corinthians speaks of a “letter from Christ... written... with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”¹²

We may be fallen and lost. We may be bewildered and broken. We may have tried and failed, and tried and failed again. We may have sin which we cannot lift ourselves out of and hearts of stone which weigh us down to the earth, but God is able to raise up, and in this God we can place our hopes and the hopes of the entire church.

We are able to raise from these stones houses and city walls which will crumble and fall, but God is able to raise up a new Jerusalem which will stand forever. We raise up idols of stone, which can do nothing, but the Lord Jesus raises up, on a rock, his church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. We may raise upon these stones a temple, our greatest monument to human building prowess, to last forever— from which not one stone will be left upon another. But God is able to raise up our salvation upon the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. We raise up stones upon our graves, testifying to our death. But God raises up the stone off of the tomb, testifying to life. Praise be to our Lord who, even while standing at the door with the winnowing fork in hand, has seen fit to call us to repentance and offer us forgiveness, that God might raise us up to eternal life. Amen.

¹¹ Ezekiel 36:25-26 (NRSV).

¹² 2 Corinthians 3:3 (NRSV).