

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2, 2022 – ASH WEDNESDAY – GENESIS 30:22-24

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

²² Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. ²³ She conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." ²⁴ And she called his name Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son!" Thus far our text.

Children are a blessing from God. Ever since Adam and Eve, the continuation of the human race depends upon folks being “fruitful” and multiplying. This was one of the tasks that Adam was given when God created him, along with Eve – to continue to have children, to populate the earth and to subdue it. Sometimes it seems like this has been forgotten in the world in which we live today. The birth rate in most Western countries is well below the “replacement rate” of 2.1 children per woman; one of the lowest birthrates is in Japan, followed by Russia and a couple of other European countries. The effects of this low birthrate is that there are fewer children to care for their parents in their parents’ old age; fewer young people to do the physical jobs that those who are more advanced in years aren’t able to do anymore. We see the effects of this in the church – we all bemoan the fact that there aren’t more children in church, like there were years ago, when families of four, five, six, or even more children weren’t uncommon. Sunday Schools were full; Vacation Bible Schools were thriving. It wasn’t an uncommon occurrence to hear a baby cry during the service; most churches had fully stocked cry rooms or “mother’s rooms” so that fussy small children could be taken out for a while, until they were sufficiently calm. Not having as many children in society, in the church, in the family has effects that can be perceived very quickly, and even has long-term consequences.

In our text, Rachel had been waiting for a child for years and years. She was the wife of Jacob, the daughter of Laban, the pick of Jacob when he went back to his people to find a wife. Even though there was a bit of trickery involved to get Leah married off to Jacob as well as Rachel, Jacob didn't seem to object – he was completely smitten with Rachel, and would do whatever it took to have her as his wife. However, the plan for Jacob and Rachel to have children just didn't materialize. Sometimes, despite our best desires, God has other plans. We pray, we beseech, we even beg God for children, and many times His answer is “No” or “Not yet”. I've known some folks that have yearned for children, and been unable to conceive – it's a pain on the heart, especially when they see others being able to have children, and they can't. It's part of the sinful world that we live in, along with other diseases and sicknesses and trials – sometimes willing parents aren't able to have children of their own. When God blesses a family with children, it's a joyful occasion – much like the hymn, “Joy to the World” that we sang a few weeks ago to accompany the celebration of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem – and it's such a bittersweet, sad and lonely time for those who wish to have a child to come into their family.

This doesn't have to be just about wanting children and being unable to have them – we often want a lot of things that God doesn't see as being in our best interest to have. That's why we pray for temporal things according to God's perfect will, by the way – He alone knows what is best for us, and when to give us earthly blessings, and when to withhold them. Perhaps we want to be able to travel more, and experience more of God's creation. Maybe we would like a more fulfilling occupation, where we think that our skills and gifts would be better used. We might want any other of a variety of things to be given to us by our heavenly Father; and, if it's in keeping with His perfect will, He delights to lavish us with blessings. It's only when He knows that it would be detrimental to us that He doesn't give us the desires of our hearts – He is our loving Father, and He loves nothing more than to give us what we don't expect to receive.

Now, back to Rachel. She's going along in our text, seeing other mothers giving birth to children, and not having a baby of her own to love and cuddle. She's probably at the end of her rope when she comes up with the scheme to have Jacob, her husband, sleep with her servant girl in order to conceive a child that way. She was desperate; especially with her sister, Leah, rubbing her nose in her failure to give birth. It seems that the two sisters didn't get along very well – imagine that!

But, God hadn't forgotten about Rachel and her plight – in fact, Moses tells us in the text before us that “God remembered Rachel, listened to her, and opened her womb”. Now, remembering in terms of God's actions is a little different than remembering when it comes to us. It's not that God forgot about Rachel, and something or someone reminded Him of her. He's perfect; He doesn't make mistakes! He doesn't need to be reminded of anything! His remembrance means that He did what He was intending to do all along – bless Rachel with a child. Bless her with the answer to her prayers. A close synonym to the word “remember” here is that He “answered” her, or “responded” to her. He did that which He determined in His perfect will to do in the first place – give her the answer to her prayers. No longer would Rachel be known as the woman that was barren; instead, she would have a son. God is overwhelmingly generous and gracious in His dealings with us sinful people; ever since the fall into sin, He would have been justified in forgetting about us entirely and moving on to work with another group of people. But, He remembers His people; He blesses His people; He answers the prayers of His people.

But, you're asking the question – how does this relate to Lent? Don't we normally talk about Jesus and His Passion and death and Resurrection during this time? Stay tuned – we'll get there in a minute! After all, Lent is a preparation time for Easter, getting us ready for the greatest of days, the festival of all festivals, even greater than Christmas, the chief of all the Sundays. We've waited with expectation for the Son of Man to be revealed; on Easter morn, we rejoice that He is risen from the dead. And, because He's risen, we can be assured that He will take us with Him into heavenly glory, because our sins are paid for. Our reproach, our barrenness, our sinful condition, will be set right once

again. No longer will we have to hide in shame from God because we are unclean and destitute; He has changed us into the blessed recipients of His grace that He's always intended us to be.

It's even mentioned in our text – a foreshadowing, a type (using a theological term) to another birth of another child – Jesus the Christ. “May the Lord add to me another son!” Now, in Genesis times, Rachel would have the pleasure to have another child – Joseph's full brother, Benjamin, whom Jacob was especially concerned about when the brothers journeyed into Egypt to find food, and who was imperiled because of the assumed treachery of his older brothers. But, there's another Child that we should mention at this point – the Child Jesus, born in Bethlehem. No, Joseph and Benjamin weren't the line bearers to the Savior – their half brother, Judah, fulfilled that role. But, in the same way that God provided Rachel with two children, not just one, in His great abundance, so He also provided a lineage to the birth of Christ the Lord. It took generation after generation; the line of succession dipped and dived a little bit; sometimes it seemed like the lineage was going to die out. But, God never wavered. He remembered us, His children. He remembered our prayers for the forgiveness of our sins, for restoration to the sight of God once more in heaven, for salvation from the fires of hell. He didn't forget about us; He saved us. He didn't write us off; He intimately came to us when we could not come to Him. He provides everything we need and then some – out of His amazing love and provision.

As we journey through this Lenten season, this is going to be a season of remembrance, as it always is. We remember the reason that Christ had to come, and live a perfect life, and die the death of a criminal, and rise on the Third Day – because we were unable to help ourselves with our problem of sin. We're going to explore the fact that Joseph is a type of Christ – the promised son, born in an unusual way (Joseph to a barren mother; Jesus to a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit). We're going to follow the life of Joseph as a way of exploring the themes that pertain to our Lenten journey – it's amazing how they match up, as you'll see as we go along with these special services. More importantly, and connected to our lives, we're going to learn that it's less about our remembering than it is about

God's remembering – His blessing, His answering prayer, His response to our dire needs. On this Ash Wednesday, we call to mind our sins, and put ashes on our foreheads to mark the fact that dust we are, and to dust we shall return. We're made perfectly aware that we not only sin against God every day, every hour; but we also desire to sin when we're not actively sinning – that sinful nature is what condemns us to the fires of hell. But, we also remember that God remembers us – when we forget, He is faithful. When we are driven to distraction, He brings our focus back to what is truly important – eternal life. As we talk about Joseph, we're reminded that God remembered Rachel, God remembered Noah on the Ark, God remembered each one of us in our distress and need. He answered that need by providing the Savior, Jesus, to fix what was wrong, and rescue us from our dire situation. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.