

## WALK THIS WAY

This morning we find ourselves in Ephesians, a wonderful letter in many ways. I well remember the words that were spoken at my ordination by our Association Minister at the time, Bob Strommen:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ  
(Ephesians 4:11-12)

The letter also includes a beautiful passage about inclusion that occurs a bit beyond our selection this morning from chapter 2:

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God. (Ephesians 2:17-22)

Although the title would lead us to believe that the letter was written specifically to the church in Ephesus similarly, for example, to First and Second Corinthians, the letter functions far more as a word to Christian churches in general than particular instructions to a named congregation. Long assumed to be written by Paul, most likely written late in his career, many scholars are now of the opinion that Paul probably did not write this letter, but that it was composed by later followers. Regardless of authorship, Ephesians picks up on several of Paul's themes and shares some of his convoluted writing style.

In the original Greek, verses 1-7 form a single, one hundred twenty four word sentence whose subject, God, does not appear until verse 4, with the main verbs following in verses 5-6. Aren't you glad English translators broke that up a bit?! The emphasis is on God's grace – not the sinfulness of life without God – “by grace you have been saved,” and, later to drive home the point, “... and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”

Saved from what? Ephesians speaks of “...the ruler of the power of the air” as though at some point we've all lived in some other realm. At first, we may be tempted to think that such a cosmology is a relic of an ancient era, but I suspect we all know a bit about living in another realm, a realm that doesn't reflect the world as God created and intends it to be. It is a world of poverty, homelessness, alcoholism, drug abuse, systemic racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, cronyism, ageism, consumerism. It is a world in which injustice is baked into the system and in which many folks are trapped and enslaved with little possibility of escape. I think of the stories of folks, who having been brutally ensnared in this distorted world, reach rock bottom and

cry out to God as there last hope, and once freed tell the story of their redemption and freedom. I think it can be hard to relate to such stories at times. Preacher Thomas Long comments:

You were dead through trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world,” says Ephesians, but now “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing.” To see this statement as applicable to us, to swallow even one ounce of this claim, we must admit a cluster of truths about ourselves we would rather not face—that we are captive to cultural and spiritual forces over which we have no control, that they have drained the life out of us, that we are unable to think or feel or crawl our way free, and that we are in urgent need of a God who comes to rescue. In short, we need saving. We can accommodate this, perhaps, in a 12-step program, but to encounter it as a description of our true and basic selves sends us scrambling for safer ground.

A key concept in Ephesians that can be easily overlooked due to our English translations, is the concept of “walking” that bookends our passage this morning. What we read as, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world,” actually contains the underlying Greek word for “walking” as in “you walked in according to this world.” And the chapter concludes with, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” What we hear as, “way of life” is again, “walked” as in, we have been prepared by God in order to walk in good works.”

Here is where some caution is needed. The letter is not suggesting that it is up to us to choose to walk the right path. Remember, it is “by grace” that God has saved us – not our works. No, Ephesians is lifting up that what God does it completely lift us out of one course or way of walking and then places us in a new context. Lutheran pastor Kyle Fever envisions it like this:

The idea might be equivalent to the house in which we live and make our dwelling. One sets up a house according to everyday living habits, preferences, and things we take for granted. And the set up reinforces these everyday habits. We put the toothpaste in a certain drawer; we place pots and pans in certain places because of how and why we use them. This is more than just “ways” or “course” of the house. It’s an entire environment that makes for certain ways of going about the details.

I think our time of living with COVID-19 has taught us something of this. One day we were going along as normal, thinking we knew the limits of what was possible and in an instant that was all turned upside down. We were placed into a context we wouldn’t have chosen, forced to live in “a house” we never would have purchased. Our entire concept of literally “walking” – going anywhere, was upended. And into this mess, God has been with all along. Giving us room to breathe, calming our anxiety, showing us other ways to “walk,” reminding us of what is at the core of being human, of being people of faith. What might this tells us as we contemplate emerging into the “new normal.” As we prepare to enter yet another context, to leave one house for the next, to relearn “walking,” what might we want to reflect upon, what new paths would like we to take, how might we like to stretch our legs in new ways?

A few thoughts that come to my mind include: What will it mean to how we worship when we are able to worship face to face? Some folks, for a variety of reasons, will continue to connect with us remotely. It's not just an A/V technical question. Everything we do in face to face worship will continue to need to be adapted for remote worship. Whether it's singing hymns and sharing lyrics or a ritual action like communion, baptism, laying on of hands, we will need to figure out how folks viewing from home can fully participate with us. We may have to think about screens in the Meeting House. I know that makes some folks uncomfortable but I'm sure we can figure it out.

And what about our mission and outreach? How might we deepen our relationships with the folks we support financially? At the least, any person, or group, or organization we engage in mission with should be invited to preach and/or witness in worship at least once a year. How might we get to know them better, hear their stories, and learn how best to address their needs as full partners in ministry.

And what about our immediate community? How might we better walk with our neighbors? Perhaps we can imagine actually walking neighborhoods to become better acquainted with the folks in our community, and to engage in some deep listening.

As much as we look forward to gathering in this space and inviting others in, COVID has reminded us that our mission and ministry is bigger than our building.

As we emerge from our COVID context let us be attentive to how God has freed us to walk in new ways for the good in our world, nation, community, our neighbors, and family.

AMEN.