

THERE IS A PLAN

I don't remember why I initially chose the Ephesians passage as our scripture this morning, but as I continued to read it over and over, I found it just made me feel good. Which is all well and good until you get to the point of actually having to formulate a sermon around it. Yes, it feels good – but what are we supposed to do with it?

Well, one approach would be to dissect it: to examine what we know about its historical background — who wrote this letter (was it really Paul?), when was it written? who was the intended audience? And then to take these 11 verses apart line by line, and when we're done with all that, put the whole thing back together and look at what it has to say to us today. That would be pretty standard procedure for creating a sermon.

In a nutshell, I can tell you that most scholars believe this letter was not written by Paul but by a follower who had at hand a collection of Paul's letters and was seeking to preach to the church at a slightly later period of time. Early manuscripts don't include the phrase in the letter's opening that identifies it with saints "who are in Ephesus" so the letter was most likely a "circular letter" that wasn't intended for a broad audience rather than a specific church or faith community. A main focus of the letter is the coming together of Jews and Gentiles, the need for unity in diversity, and God's blessing for all. So, that's some basic exegesis of the text. But I don't think this passage lends itself to this approach. So, what are we to do with it?

It reminds me a bit of a contemporary music recital I attended at the Conservatory years ago. A composition student connected with First Church had invited me and was excited for me to hear the compositions of some of his peers. After the recital the student introduced me to his teacher and the professor asked me, "So, what did you think?" And said, "I don't know – I'm not sure what to do with it." To which, the professor very graciously replied, "You don't have to do anything with it." Is it enough – sufficient – to simply hear this passage for Ephesians or, is there something more we can glean from it?

What the New Revised Standard Version breaks up into 6 verses is actually one long sentence in the original Greek. Anne (today's liturgist), I know you have the lungs of trained vocalist but aren't you glad the NRSV gave you a few breaks? To get a sense of how this passage originally sounded to its audience we can go to the King James Version which only breaks it up to 3 verses:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

⁴ According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

⁵ Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

⁶ To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

[pause/breathe]

⁷ In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;

⁸ Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence;

⁹ Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself:

¹⁰ That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him:

¹¹ In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

¹² That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.

[pause/breathe]

¹³ In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,

¹⁴ Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. [full stop]

It leaves you breathless, doesn't it? Perhaps that's the point. As New Testament Professor Brian Peterson notes:

... the rambling form of the sentence, which seems to have trouble finding a place to stop, reinforces the claim that there is no end to God's grace. This is the grammar of worship more than it is the grammar of logical argument, and it is no surprise if we are left struggling to keep up.

I often find myself struggling to keep up these days – how about you? I just don't have the energy I thought I would have emerging from COVID? It's not that I'm fed up with my job burned out. I'm just weary. I'm largely weary of making plans and seeing them fall apart over and over and over and over again. I'm ready to give up planning all together, but that just doesn't seem possible. There is an old Yiddish saying: "Der mentsh trakht un Got lakht" often translated: "Man plans, God laughs" or "man proposes; God disposes." Literally it's: "man thinks and God laughs," so when we're at the idea stage – not yet even yet planning – God is already having a good time.

God is laughing because we try so hard and at times we just don't get it. Our plans are downright Lilliputian compared to God's plan. But we keep trying to move mountains, one wheelbarrow load at a time. I suppose it's a comfort when we think we are in charge and can create the change we seek. Bluegrass artist Becky Buller in the song "Speakin' To That Mountain" sings:

I'm speakin' to that mountain
And, brother, I believe
God above can move it
But He might want to move me.

And here may be the best clue to our passage from Ephesians this morning: It's not designed to give us marching orders or to invite us to make plans, it's designed to move us. To move us from

our efforts and anxiety's to thanksgiving. The writer Anne Lamott, has said that she has only two basic prayers: "Help, help, help" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you." The opening of our passage this morning: "Blessed be God" —these words remind us that the first movements of prayer should be thanksgiving and praise directed to God. Why? Because there is a plan.

I think that's the underlying message that even subconsciously I was receiving as I read this passage over and over in the study.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world... He destined us for adoption as his... In him we have redemption ... the forgiveness of our trespasses; ... he has made known to us the mystery of his will, ... a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth... we have also obtained an inheritance, ... you ...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

It is a plan that move us beyond division to unity. I can't think of a better assurance for these days. Speaking later in Ephesians to the coming together of Jews and Gentiles, the letter offers a phrase for our times: "So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ..." I don't know, sounds like Hybrid Church to me. It also sounds like the promise of mending much deeper divisions.

As we continue to emerge from COVID it's hard, if not impossible to plan for what comes next. In those moments, when we may feel overwhelmed for the need to plan while still weary from an extended period of upheaval let us receive God's words of blessing and promise. Yes, there will be work to do. We have a place in God's plan, but it is God's plan, not ours. The way forward will include planning on our part, but planning that comes from deep discernment of God's plan, of listening to one another for God's stillspeaking voice so we can discover our role in the grand scheme and play our part.

Let us always begin with thanksgiving – thanksgiving for God who plans and acts, who destines and ordains, who continually works to bring us *all* together as one. The God whose amazing blessing can leave us breathless yet comforted if we are open to receiving it.

AMEN