

July 11, 2021
Hope Lutheran Church
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Ephesians 1:3-14

A Life of Hope and Praise

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our epistle readings for the next several weeks are taken from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I'd like to focus my sermons each week on these readings. We'll take a deep dive into the letter.

Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison. We don't know where that imprisonment was, but he mentions that he's in chains.

So a little about Ephesus: Ephesus was located on the western edge of Asia Minor. Its ruins are situated in the modern-day country of Turkey. Ephesus was just a little upriver from the Aegean Sea. The river was navigable and the city had a good port. The city was also near to major trade routes. Access to the sea, a good port, trade routes: this combination made Ephesus an optimal site for international trade. It was a major city of about 250,000 people. Ephesus would have rivaled Athens and Corinth.

The theater in Ephesus was massive. It could seat about 25,000 people. For comparison: The Target Center in the Twin Cities seats a little over 19,000 people.

Ephesus was home to the third largest library in the ancient world. The international port, the huge theater, the world-class library, these all gave Ephesus distinction.

But without a doubt, the most significant item in Ephesus was its temple to the Greek

goddess Artemis. Not much of the temple remains today, just this one column. But at the time of Paul, the temple there was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

It was constructed of white marble and its columns were massive. This temple made Ephesus a religious destination as well as a trade center. Pilgrims streamed there to pay homage to Artemis.

Paul visited Ephesus on his third and final missionary journey. He stayed in the city for two years. During that time he proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. The young church was comprised of some Jewish converts, but mostly its membership came from the Gentile realm.

As time went on, the young Christian community grew in size. This distressed one particular man of Ephesus who made his living as a silversmith. He was part of the network of artisans who created religious objects related to the worship of Artemis. As more and more people were turning to Christianity, his sales in silver shrines took a hit.

This man stirred up a frenzy against the growing Christian community. A city-wide riot broke out opposing Christianity. Two of Paul's traveling companions were carried away by the enraged crowd. Eventually the furor abated and no one was hurt. But after that incident, it was decided that it was time for Paul to move on.

So this is the community to whom Paul writes. The verses we hear today are at the very beginning of his letter. We can't tell from our English text, but the original Greek is one long sentence. These verses comprise a single train of thought. Paul leads off his letter by describing God's plan of salvation. In these eleven short verses he lays out his entire theology.

Paul describes an expansive and immensely benevolent plan for salvation. He points out several amazing aspects to this grace.

First of all, God had grace and salvation in mind right from the start. In fact, God laid out this plan for salvation even before God had laid out the foundations of the world! God intended salvation even before there was anything to save! Grace predates time.

There's a rabbinic tale that sounds very close to this. God was just about to bring all things into being. But then God looks ahead. God can see how things are going to play out. God sees all of the sin and suffering, the rage and hatred and destruction. God thinks, "Well, maybe I shouldn't do this." But then the idea comes to God. God knows what God will do: God will forgive. And with that in mind, God brings creation into being.

Grace and salvation was God's plan all along. Paul describes God with immense benevolence. Grace isn't something doled out in a miserly fashion. It's not in short supply. God isn't at all worried about running out of grace. No, Paul says God LAVISHES it on us! There is more than enough grace, more than enough forgiveness to go around! Paul says all this occurs according to God's "good pleasure." It's freely bestowed upon us.

There is nothing miserly in this vision of God, just the opposite. Nothing could be

further from the truth. This supply of divine mercy simply cannot be exhausted.

Unfortunately, there are many other models of God floating around in the church. God is depicted as an angry judge. God is displeased with us. Our salvation is in peril. Our only recourse is to appeal to Christ to save us from the wrath of God. In this model, Jesus comes to die for us because God's wrath must be appeased and satisfied. Jesus takes the fall for us. He takes the full brunt of punishment that should have meted out on us.

But that is not at all what Paul describes. No, Paul sees that the origins of this effusive grace and redemption is in God. It's been there all along! And now, in the fullness of time, this perfect, divine plan unfurled in Christ. And it's huge. God intends to gather up all things, all things in heaven and on earth.

I've learned to pay attention any time I see those words, "all things" in the New Testament. *Ta panta* in Greek. Whenever those words come up, something really big is about to happen! It's not *some* things; it's not *most* things; it's not even *many* things. It's ALL things. If you ever have some spare time, it's very interesting to do a word study in a New Testament concordance on that phrase: all things.

We find it two times in our passage today. According to Paul, God plans to gather up all things in Christ. These are not the actions of an angry judge. This is not the plan of a God who loves little. This is the plan and these are the actions of our benevolent, generous, loving God.

This was the plan behind Jesus. This is the motivation to send Christ to us: precisely because we are lost, because we can't find our own way home, Jesus came to restore

what had been broken. He came to bridge the rift between humanity and the divine. He IS the way. In coming all the way to us, by identifying with us so completely he followed us even into the finality of death, he has brought us healing and restoration.

Paul tells the Ephesians that they've been marked with a seal. It's the seal of the cross we receive at our baptism. At a baptism, a cross is drawn on the forehead of the person being baptized. These words are then declared: "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

At our baptism we were adopted into God's holy family. That adoption was our destiny. We didn't choose God. God chose us. And the cross we received on our forehead, that is the pledge, Paul says. He calls it the "pledge of our inheritance."

Other Bible versions translate that word "pledge" differently. It can also be "deposit" or "earnest" or "down payment." That word from ancient Greek still has a very interesting usage in modern day Greek. It's used in connotation with an engagement ring. The ring given to the beloved is a pledge. It says, "I love you. Let this ring be a sign of my intentions. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

When you received the sign of the cross on your forehead at your baptism, that seal is God's pledge to you. It's the sign of God's good pleasure; it's the down payment of God's lavish love; it's the deposit of the riches of God's grace. In that seal, you see and know God's destiny for you. This was God's plan for you since before the world came into being.

And this, my friends, is Paul's understanding of God's ultimate plan. With this powerful,

uplifting gospel he launches his letter to the Ephesians. The message is still every bit as joyous to us.

In summary, Paul uses two words that encapsulate the gospel's significance on our lives: Hope and Praise. This good message sets our hope on Christ. That hope keeps us strong through all adversities and challenges. We know that all has been accomplished through him. It was all part of God's plan since the beginning. Our destiny, our adoption as children of God has been made secure. And in that hope, we can live joyfully. We live in praise. Let our lives be a testimony of hope and praise in this amazing grace.