

Worship for Sunday, January 3, 2021 (Christmastide 2/New Year)

Texts: Ephesians 1:1-14

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Epistle Reading: Ephesians 1:1-14

(Marilyn Preisler)

{From} Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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 to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

These words of consolation from Jeremiah during his people's exile really resonate with me right now, as we wait for everyone to get a vaccine and for everyone to be able to gather together again. Listen...

Hebrew Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-9

For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Sermon

- I. Like I mentioned in the children's sermon, most of the New Testament is made up of letters;

- a. written and carried between different towns by foot and read to congregations and cherished for centuries.
 - b. Many written by Paul, some while in prison, or by his students after he died
 - c. Written for the purpose of teaching new Christians, encouraging them in hard times, showing gratitude for their ministry, sometimes admonishing them when they went off course, settling disputes, or celebrating victories,
- II. We don't take much time to write letters much these days
- a. We've resorted to emails and text messages; maybe phone calls if we really want to talk;
 - b. And now, the occasional Zoom...
 - c. But letters can be a particular kind of intimate expression between people,
- III. In Paul's letter to Ephesians, just in this section, there's a lot going on:
- a. he greets the congregation: *Grace to you and peace*
 - b. Celebrates God's blessings; *Christ has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing*
 - c. Reminds them God has chosen them to live an exemplary, holy life: *he chose us... to be holy and blameless...*
 - d. That they are adopted and marked as God's beloved children now: *He destined us for adoption as his children*
 - e. That they're redeemed and God has forgiven them for sins in the past
 - f. That they can discern God's will and that God promises to give them the spiritual power to carry that will out
- IV. Paul could have chosen to say anything he wanted in this letter;
- a. And his other letters can be harsh!
 - b. In one letter, he says: "*You stupid Galatians!*"
 - c. But in this part of Ephesians, Paul is crafting a message the Ephesians need to hear.
 - d. Maybe there were some who were anxious or had low self esteem; maybe they were uncertain about the future; or needed to be encouraged and lifted up; maybe they felt abandoned and needed to hear God had adopted them forever.
 - e. Paul says what the Church needs to hear; not just what he wants to say;
 - f. Like the Prophet Jeremiah, who sometimes preached fire and judgment, other times, he used words of consolation to his people exiled in Babylon, about their eventual return and restoration,
 - g. good prophets and preachers choose the right words for the right times.
 - h. That's a good lesson for me as a preacher!
- V. How long has it been since you wrote a carefully crafted letter to someone?
- a. For New Year's, let's write some letters to God;
 - b. I invite you to get out a **paper and pen and envelope**
 - c. Consider who your letter will be from and to:
 - i. Maybe from you to God or to Jesus; you can ask questions, say thank you, complain about things; whatever it is, God can take it!

- ii. Or maybe you can imagine what God would write in a letter to you and write that
 - iii. Or you could write one of each: start with your letter to God, then write God's response back to you
 - iv. What do you want to say to God or Jesus about 2020, or the new year, 2021?
 - v. What does God want to *hear from you* right now?
 - vi. Nobody but you and God will see your letters, unless you want to share them with someone;
- Take a moment, turn off the computer and work on your letters. When we come back, I'll tell you what to do with your letter;

- VI. How did it go? Do you need more time to write your letter?
 - a. When you're done, if you don't want to share it with anyone, put the letter in envelope and seal it inside;
 - b. Put it in a pajama drawer where you can find it later
 - c. A few months from now, I'll remind you to go look for it and read it and remember what you and God talked about, and see how the year 2021 is going, and how you and God are doing at that time;

- VII. Later at today's Zoom, we'll do some New Year's reflection; you can share what this exercise was like if you want at that time; or talk with a friend about it, or share with me what it was like to write it.
 - a. You can write to God any day, as many letters as you want. God always wants to hear from you!
 - b. And in all our communication with each other, Paul offers a good reminder that we should try to share not just what we want to say, but what we think the other person needs to hear from us:
 - i. About God's blessings; and what it means to live by that higher standard God is calling us to; that God is always holding out grace to us, and equipping us with spiritual power to live out our calling.
 - ii. Choose the right words for the right time.

Happy New year!

A New Year's Prayer

O God of Future and Past, you have written the book of each of our lives.
 Yet we have sometimes marred the pages with our own foolishness and wandering.
 You have guided us through a year like no other,
 And maybe we have risen up to meet its challenges, or cowered in fear or stayed calm.
 You know what we are capable of, together or apart.
 Do your best work in us in this coming year.

In this church, help us make meaning of our past to bring hope to our future.
In this community, let us see where need is greatest,
and move toward it with compassionate love.
In this world, let each of us find our place of purpose and calling,
So that the teachings of Christ might be manifest in our work as your Church.
Hear our prayers in silence, both of gratitude and concern...
We pray for those who are sick, and for their caregivers and health care workers...
For those who are hungry or need shelter in the cold of winter...
For those grieving or lonely...
Help us find our purpose and ministry among those who need your word of hope.
These things we pray in the name of the Christ Child
