

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Second Sunday after Christmas

January 3, 2021

Psalm 119:97–104 (ESV):

97 Oh how I love your law!

It is my meditation all the day.

98 Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is ever with me.

99 I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your testimonies are my meditation.

100 I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.

101 I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.

102 I do not turn aside from your rules,
for you have taught me.

103 How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

104 Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

First Reading: 1 Kings 3:4–15 (ESV):

4 And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place. Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. 5 At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." 6 And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. 7 And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. 9 Give

your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?"

10 It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. 11 And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, 12 behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. 13 I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. 14 And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days."

15 And Solomon awoke, and behold, it was a dream. Then he came to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants.

EPISTLE: Ephesians 1:3–14 (ESV):

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

3 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, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

THE GOSPEL - Luke 2:40–52 (ESV):

40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. **42** And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. **43** And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, **44** but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, **45** and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. **46** After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. **47** And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. **48** And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." **49** **And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"** **50** And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. **51** And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. **52** And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Sermon 1 – Second Sunday of Christmas

"Where With All"

Ephesians 1:3-14

Dear friends,

Paul in our Epistle lesson opens his letter to the Christians at Ephesus with two main points that he is making, each of which feed into each other. Paul, for

reasons unknown, chooses to do this with one long sentence. This entire reading is actually one sentence in Greek, it never stops. As long-winded as Paul gets, there is a lot going on here. He is talking about the perfection and exclusivity of Christ, and using the sketch of just how eternal this plan actually is to support his point. Christ is eternal, we all know this, but that means that what Christ does is eternal, and eternal is a big big big big deal.

Ephesians is a sophisticated letter, a nuanced exploration of several different parts of the Christian faith, which made it hard for me to get into for some time. It was a friend that pointed out how special this little piece of work was, and I started to get some appreciation of it. The Christians at Ephesus are in an extremely important place, and because of this Paul has made them a significant part of his work for some time. Paul spends more time in Ephesus than he does in any other city during his mission trips. Why? Ephesus is a city on the western coast of Turkey, an important religious and commercial center, the most important one for that part of Turkey by a long shot. Paul bases himself in Ephesus, and from there can reach dozens of cities and towns in the surrounding countryside, not to mention being able to catch numerous travelers going east or west. The church suffered some intense persecution in its time, being in a city that made a great deal of money from idol worship. The Ephesians, to put a point to it, are serious Christians, veteran Christians who have seen their city turn against them for their faith a couple times at this point. These people are in it, they're committed, and Paul treats them like they are, with this advanced Christian teaching that he offers.

After some greetings, Paul gets into it. **“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, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the**

world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” This is the kind of trip-ups that Ephesians tends to do, if you're like me and you've been hearing this stuff for a long time. It sounds like Paul has hardly said anything at all, at least not anything that matters. It sounds like Paul is just stringing together a nice-sounding set of Christian words, but that's not what he's doing. Paul is doing what he does in other places, he's establishing a chain of trustworthiness. He says that Christ is blessed, why? Because Christ has blessed us. Never forget that. God doesn't make you Christian for His amusement, but for your good. God doesn't do all this because He's God and can do whatever He wants. There is a clear, visible, obvious goal at work here, and the goal is for your benefit. Christ has blessed you and that was the plan all along, but what has Christ blessed you with? Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, Paul says. What does that mean? I guess he could be talking about what happens after we die. Heaven will have many blessings, after all, no reason to doubt that, but what has always struck me about Jesus is how doesn't stay in heaven. He came down to live with us and share our burden, He came to us in Baptism, He's coming to us now in His Word. So what is this all about? All of the good things God does for you, He doesn't expect you to earn them. He doesn't make you jump through hoops to prove you're worth it. You know that you aren't saved by your works, we repeat that to death, but that's what this means, and this isn't just about salvation. God isn't waiting for you to shape up before He likes you, before He takes care of you, before He's with you. He doesn't withhold His blessings from you. He doesn't even make you work for them. He just gives them, more than that, He brings them to you, freely. Christ may have blessed you in the heavenly places, that may be where Christ is, but none of that stays put. He crosses the gap between you and Him and brings it you.

Paul goes on to say that all this was the plan from the beginning. That before there was even anything called time, from the very depths of eternity, this was God's plan all along. Each one of you He knows like an old friend and has done so from the very beginning. Your holiness, which you have from Christ, was the goal God set Himself toward even before He created mankind. If that seems the very definition of a chicken/egg scenario, yeah it kinda is, but the statement Paul makes stands. He continues this thought in verse 5. **“In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”**

Are you a part of God's plan? Sure you are. The goal of God's plan has always been to save His people, to save you. God knows all, which means God knows everything that will happen, everything that could happen, and every single variable and every single contingency of every single event. It's enough to make your head spin. Am I just some kind of meat-puppet for God? Do I even make my own choices? None of that is the point of what Paul is saying. What Paul is offering is the comfort that God has always, always planned for this. That your salvation is no accident, that God's love and care for you is not some flighty whim that He has come up with. No, God's saving you, God's care for you, was the goal before you were even you. You and I are sons of Christ, which means we've inherited everything Christ accomplished on this earth and on the cross. Nothing is an accident with God, He is not capable of a whoops. Even in the most out-of-control up-and-down madness of your life, God planned it all, He compensates and accounts for it all, and He knows every conceivable outcome of it all.

This blessing comes through Christ Himself, but the blessing also IS Christ Himself, which is self-referential logic if I've ever heard it. **“7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”** From the very beginning He has brought Christ to us, He has planned to do it at points in time. From the very beginning Christ was crucified for our sins, carried out at a moment in time. From the very beginning we were Christ's sons. Rather than getting hung up on the wibbly wobbly timey-wimey thing, how can this be when that is, take this from it. God's purpose is your salvation, yes, your benefit, yes. Did you choose this? No. Can you turn your back on it? Yes, you can, but He will never turn His back on you, and He will fight you should you try to shove Him out of your life. Most of you aren't wanting to do that anyhow, but God wouldn't just let you do it. He won't let the devil or the world have their way with you. The doubts are very scary, and the ways that things could go wrong even more so, and there are a thousand ways it could these days. God knows we doubt, He knows our weaknesses, He knows our sins, better than we ever could. Despite all that, God is committed to helping us work through them, and He has been from the very beginning. You don't fight alone, you don't even do the lion's share of fighting, Christ does it for you. With you. Through you. Each of those insignificant little moments, those little triumphs, when you have trusted God, when you have ignored the devil's lies, when you have refused to believe the nonsense the world throws at you. Each of those moments when you refuse to give in to despair or anger, when you decide to keep moving, keep Christian, try to do

better. Each time you bring your sins and your messed up self to God's altar and ask for forgiveness, He had them all in mind even before He made you. He wanted you to do all of them, and is delighted when you do. As Paul says even further, this is God's glory, it is what He takes pride in. The devil wants you to focus on the times you've failed, and the world gets in on this too. The times you've not done those things. God planned for that too. He engineered His faith in you precisely for those moments, maybe even through those moments. He wants to unite God with man, and He did so in Jesus, and because of Jesus God isn't going to turn His back on you when you screw it up. Far from it, it makes Him double down, because He's accounted for all of it in His grand plan.

Paul says that we are given this wisdom, and it has to be. Again, God doesn't make you fight for it. He gives it to you, and He gives it to you as deep or as shallow as you can handle. He doesn't let you settle for the basics, He pushes you through trouble and circumstance to deepen your faith and strengthen it. Christianity is very weird in its concepts, a God who is three in one, a God who is also man, one Jewish laborer dying so that all may live eternally. God knows this, which is why He undertakes to educate you, to school you, through life, through troubles, through heartache, and through the voice of His Word. Paul invites you to be delighted with how wide and deep God's love is, that He plans all this, that He gives you not just Jesus, but the eyes to see Jesus in your life, the ears to hear His Word even when you're not in church. This week, try to see. Try to see Jesus in your enemies, in the people you hate, even if its just reading a newspaper or taking your thirtieth robocall of the week, ask yourself, what does Jesus have to do with this? Try to see Jesus in the good, the ways your neighbor and your family are there for you and help you. Try to see Jesus in the world, in its convulsions and pains, in its sicknesses

and deaths. Where is Jesus in all of it? He is saving in all of it. He is preaching in all of it. He is with you in all of it. He said Himself He planned to do it right from the start.

Amen.