

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Sunday, April 18, 2021

“Ephesians 1: The Blessings of God”

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell, Senior Pastor

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor – Welcome and Announcements

Hello everyone and welcome to the worship of God here at First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth. I'm excited that you have chosen to join us today!

Today is Sunday, April 18th. I am joined in worship this morning by Pastor Emily Campbell and Darlene Maginley. Our musician this morning is Bekah Brudi. And as always, a special thanks to Susan Underhill for her video and editing skills that help make these online worship services possible.

I have a couple of announcements for us before we get into worship. First, I just want to say thank you; a very, very special heartfelt ‘thank you’ to everyone who gave to the Deacon special offering that we took during Holy Week. I found out earlier this week that we've raised almost \$8,000 for the Deacons! And, friends, let me say when I saw that I am not speechless very often! My heart was just so filled with joy that there aren't words to say except thank you, thank you for believing in the work and ministry of the Deacons, for caring for our community, for standing behind all of the projects that God has put on the hearts of the deacons to do! Again, thank you for supporting that ministry! I could say it one hundred more times, but I will say it just once more. Thank you for your generosity to that important cause.

My second announcement is that this coming Saturday, April 24th, Local Mission will be holding a drive-by drop off collection for Hope Clinic. The collection will be held from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. in the church parking lot. They are looking for items like tote bags with cardboard bottoms and baking mixes, like pancake mix or the Jiffy brand corn muffin mix. Things like that would be greatly appreciated. I want to thank you in advance for what I'm sure will be a generous collection for Hope Clinic.

My third announcement: I want to mention that on Sunday morning, May 2nd, our church is packing 400 lunches for Crossroads Soup Kitchen in Detroit. We will be traveling to the Crossroads Soup Kitchen in Detroit to serve the meal. Volunteers are needed to work, starting at 9:15 a.m. and ending at 1:30 p.m. It's okay if you need to come a little bit later or leave a little bit early. I just encourage you to look in this morning's bulletin or in the Friday email about details of how to register and let them know that you will be coming and helping with this mission.

And then, finally, a reminder that if you're interested in checking out all that Building and Grounds has been up to these past few months, especially as we have been out of the building, that you are invited to take a church tour. Please reach out to Joe Thomas to see when these tours are available. I really do want to encourage you to take one of these tours. It's pretty incredible to see all the good work that Buildings and Grounds has been up to. Some of the work, of course, you wouldn't notice on your own, because it's in the ceilings

and in the walls. By having Joe or one of our other Building and Grounds committee members take you through the process, you will get to understand all the hard work that they are doing to make this church such a hospitable space for us to return to.

And so, as you can hear, our church is still very busy and lively with the ministries that God has gifted us with! I encourage you to read this week's bulletin again or look at that Friday e-newsletter that comes out each week, so that you can know all that we're doing and find ways for yourself to get involved, if you feel the spirit moving you in that way.

So, friends, as we prepare for worship, let us prepare our hearts for the Spirit's presence and movement with us this morning. I invite you now to join me in our opening prayer. Let us pray.

Ashley S. Ashley – Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we have gathered today to praise you. We come because we want to, we sing because we are glad to, and we pray because we need to. And we draw near to you because it is what we are created to do. Please still our restless thoughts, focus our wandering minds, and open the door of our hearts so that you may enter in. We pray all of this through Jesus Christ, our true joy and Savior. Amen.

Bekah Brudi plays guitar and sings “Be Thou My Vision”

Darlene Maginley, Director of Children's Ministry – Children's Message

Hi, kids! I especially love playing with binoculars. They are so much fun, even when they're pretend ones like I have here with two toilet paper tubes. But even if you have a real binocular that helps you see something very small a long way away, I have found that there is a problem with binoculars. The problem when you play with binoculars is that you can only see that tiny little circle through the binoculars. You don't see everything around you.

My family and I went on vacation for spring break and one night we stayed in a hotel, but we were on the 21st floor. When we walked out onto the balcony, from the 21st floor you could literally see for miles around. The view was beautiful.

Well, there's a book in the Bible that we're going to be talking about for the next few weeks. It's called Ephesians, and Ephesians is kind of like standing on the 21st floor of a hotel on the balcony, looking all the way around. It kind of tells us the whole big picture of what Christianity is all about, what believing in God means. In Ephesians, which is a very short book of the Bible--it only has six chapters, it talks about how much God loves us and it tells about how he sent Jesus to us as a free gift. It talks about how we should love and treat other people. It tells about how we should behave if we are Christians and believe in God.

There's a verse right toward the beginning of Ephesians. Somebody took that verse and made it into a very popular song that we sing a lot in church, especially in the Upper Room. It's called, “Open the Eyes of my Heart, Lord.” The song talks about opening the eyes of his heart so that he can meditate on God.

Well, what exactly does that mean? We all know that our heart beating in our chest does not have eyeballs! Our heart cannot “see,” but when we love something we talk about feeling it in

our heart. That's what the Bible verse means. It says open the part of me that loves, open that part that feels things very deeply, so that I can be open to how much God loves me, so that then I can show other people how much I love them and how much God loves them. It's kind of the thought of not looking through binoculars at yourself and your own little world and problems. It's like standing on that big balcony and seeing all of the love that God wants us to see.

Let's pray together. Dear God, thank you for giving our hearts eyes that can see your love and can see love for other people, and that helps us to share your love with the other people. Please help us to not look through binoculars at our little problems, but to stand on the 21st floor balcony and look all around at all of the amazing love that you have given us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Introduction of Sermon Series Theme

In the last twenty years, the biggest tourist attraction in London has not been the Tower of London, or St. Paul's Cathedral, or even Harrods Department store. The biggest tourist attraction in the last twenty years has been the London Eye! Now, from a distance you may know that the London Eye looks like a giant Ferris wheel, but this truly is no carnival ride. For a start, it is absolutely massive. It rises 450 feet above the River Thames. It holds thirty-two capsules, and each individual capsule holds twenty adults. Those capsules take half an hour to make a full rotation. Five years ago, my family was blessed in being able to experience the London Eye. I will tell you it is an absolutely fabulous way to see a bird's eye view of the city. If you happen to be there on a day when the weather cooperates with you and the clouds are clear, you can see the whole of London, at every point, from that particular attraction.

I share all of this with you, not because I want you to ditch this church service and go book yourself a ticket to London, but rather because I believe that analogy of the London Eye that provides an overview is a really helpful analogy for us when it comes to looking at the letter written to the church in Ephesus. That letter written by the Apostle Paul is very much an overview of the whole of Christian thought.

If you are familiar with a lot of the other writings from the Apostle Paul, then you'll know that often Paul writes to churches addressing specific problems or challenges. But in this case, as Paul writes not only to the church in Ephesus but really to the surrounding churches of that area, Paul is not addressing any particular issue. He is providing this comprehensive view of Christian theology.

Now I'm extremely grateful to contemporary British biblical scholar Tom Wright, for it is he who first made the comparison of the book of Ephesians, or the Letter to the Ephesians, with the London Eye. As we begin this new sermon series over the next five weeks, focused on the six chapters of the Letter to the Ephesians, we will cover a lot of territory; yet it will give us a *taste*, a taste of all the wonderful aspects of our faith that are available to us. Let me make this small disclaimer if you are watching this today and you are an English major or if you are simply a fan of proper grammar. I will tell you right off the bat that this letter will drive you a bit crazy. It contains within it some of the world's longest run-on sentences. The Apostle Paul was writing here at the very end of his life. He is really trying to summarize everything he has learned about faith throughout his whole life. He's writing from a prison cell in Rome. He has nothing but time on his hands and he is writing, in Greek, very long, deeply meaningful, beautifully poetic lines, which I'm afraid miss somewhat in translation.

What I can tell you, also, is although this is a short book to read it is *not* an easy book to read. I encourage you to take on the challenge of reading this, but don't give up when you become confused. Stay with us and dive deep. I know some of you may be asking, "Why on earth are we studying such a difficult book in the midst of Covid?" Let me just say I have asked myself that question, but I truly feel that God is leading us to look at this letter, this letter from Paul, a letter he was writing when events in his life were absolutely outside of his control. We know a little bit about what that is like, to live in a day and a time with circumstances outside of our control.

I think there's a lot we can learn from those who have gone before us in faith. With that in mind, we hold on to the truth that the God who was faithful to the Apostle Paul then is faithful to us today.

Let us turn our attention now to Ephesians, chapter 1, as we begin by reading verses 1 through 14. The Apostle Paul writes this,

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Scripture Reading

Ephesians 1:1-14 (NIV)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Friends, may God bless this, the reading of His holy word, and may He bless it to our understanding. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sermon: "Ephesians 1: The Blessings of God"

Would you all please pray with me. Holy God, as we journey through your word today, lead us closer to you. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends, this morning we're going to start by journeying to Jerusalem. As you know, around the world, archaeologists are always finding secrets about life in ancient cultures. Even in the past week, in the news, we have seen recent discoveries and findings.

But late in the 20th century, in the holy city of Jerusalem, archaeologists discovered a set of stairs approaching what was once the ancient temple in Jerusalem. These temple steps approached the Temple Mount from the south side. They were unique because, as one biblical scholar has said, these southern steps appeared to be designed either by a child or, more shockingly, by an adult who was completely incompetent or possibly intoxicated. If you saw these steps, you might understand why the commentator was so harsh in his critique. Every single step on that southern side varied in size by several inches in height and the stretch of each step varied sometimes by a matter of feet.

If any of the many engineers in our congregation were to look at these steps, I have no doubt they would all shake their heads in disgust. But apparently rabbis in Jesus's day looked at those exact same steps and saw them as a teaching tool.

Historically, rabbis taught that those difficult southern steps served as a reminder to God's people not to approach the Christian life in a hurry. We are not competing in a race to see who can get to the temple or to the church the fastest. We are not trying to get into God's presence as fast as possible. Worship was never meant to be done at a sprint. We are, instead, supposed to carefully measure and plan our approach to God, or supposed to be mindful of our steps. Enjoy the view, both that which is behind us and that which is ahead of us.

In so many ways, these crazy uneven steps also serve for us as a perfect metaphor of what it's like to read the book of Ephesians. This is not a book that any of us should race through, trying to finish. We hope in reading it to grow in our understanding. Even more importantly, we hope to grow in faith.

What we need to do is to take time, time to wrestle with the deep theological concepts found within the six chapters of this book and as we seek deeper understanding and application, my prayer for us all is that God will increase our wonder, God will infuse our worship with more spirit, and we will find that God is speaking to our lives and our circumstances even today.

That you may ask, how on earth is that possible? How could God speak into our circumstances right now? Let me remind you that Paul was writing this particular letter while he was a prisoner in Rome. He was not under house arrest. He was actually in chains, in prison, and he lacked all personal freedom.

The Apostle knew all too well what it felt like to be confined by his circumstances. Due to his confinement, Paul was unable to gather with other faith-filled friends. He couldn't gather with family members over meals. He couldn't be in public areas. He was socially distanced from his family and brothers and sisters in faith. I have to believe, at times, Paul must have felt horribly isolated and very much alone. He must have had both good days and bad days in this prison experience, days where he felt close to God and days, I imagine, when he questioned if God had forgotten him or abandoned him altogether.

The Apostle Paul remarkably holds on to hope throughout this letter and really throughout the darkest experiences within his life. I believe the Apostle Paul was able to keep this hope so firmly in his grasp because he realized that his freedom was in no way dependent on his circumstances. Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 3 through 14, records Paul's words of praise.

Yes, praise! Written from his prison cell, he counted himself *blessed*, blessed to be chosen in Christ, blessed to be one of God's children.

He believed himself to be saved from sin and from death through the redemption of Christ's blood. He therefore believed himself blessed because he was free from guilt, free from shame. He could experience the forgiveness of sins, not because of his actions or his circumstances, but he knew the full forgiveness and freedom from sin because of God's great love and mercy. Even in prison Paul considered himself blessed by Christ. That had *everything*, everything to do with the nature of Christ and the love of God and it has nothing to do with our present circumstances.

Paul believed himself blessed for other reasons, even while separated from every loved one, every friend, every other disciple in Christ. Paul still considered himself blessed because he was *forever* united with God. He counts himself blessed because he's part of God's larger plan and purposes at work in the world, part of God's plan of uniting all things in Christ.

Now Ephesians, chapter 1, at verse 10, especially in the NIV translation, speaks of the holy union of Christ and our lives, the union that God brings to us in Christ. In Ephesians, chapter 2, this concept of unity in Christ is a major theme that is developed and we'll see that throughout the rest of the book of Ephesians. Ashley is going to focus on that in depth next week.

Finally, even though Paul was alone in prison, he counted himself as truly blessed because he had received God's help and guidance and direction for the future in the gifting of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, as it says in verse 13 of chapter 1, the seal of God's promised inheritance. The Spirit is also, we're told, the pledge of all that is to come when full redemption of the world takes place. This gift, the gift of God's Holy Spirit, is not unlike the gift of the pillar of cloud by day and the fire by night that was gifted to God's children in the Old Testament, those children who were coming out of slavery. God never left them alone, both as they came out of slavery and as they were wandering in the wilderness.

The Apostle Paul is suggesting in this first chapter of the book of Ephesians that God has gifted us in a new way through our own experience of exodus, although that word is not used. What Paul speaks of is that we are *free*, free from slavery not the slavery put upon us by another race, but the slavery put upon us through our sin.

Through Christ we have full freedom from that slavery to sin because of the saving work of Jesus Christ. God doesn't just bring us out of slavery. God provides His holy presence to guide us as we have our own experience of wilderness wandering. The Holy Spirit goes before us and leads us to our new inheritance, not the promised land, but the renewed heaven and earth, the world that God will restore when Christ returns.

That is the inheritance to which we strive and to which we move forward in faith. God has never left his people under any circumstances. We are blessed today to build on that experience that the Apostle Paul had, of knowing God through our every experience of trial.

We are God's chosen, beloved people! Blessed and loved, moving forward in faith, we are part of the new exodus. Today we have freedom, unity, and the real and present help of the Spirit available to us, and we have reason to be grateful, for God has lifted us above our circumstances to the light of His presence.

Thanks be to God for His amazing and abiding grace. Amen.

Ashley S. Ashley — Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Friends, let us pray. God of abundance, source of all life and giver of all grace, we thank you for the gift of life, for the breath that sustains us, for the food of this earth that nurtures us, for the love of neighbors that support us. We thank you for the mystery of creation, for the beauty that we see in flowers just beginning to appear, for the joy that we hear in the birds welcoming each new day, for the hope that we receive in the warmth and brilliance of the sun. We thank you for this day, for life, for one more day to live for opportunity, and one more day to work for justice and peace, for your grace and one more experience of your presence, for your promise to be with us, to be our God, and to bring us salvation.

We thank you for setting us into communities, for families who nurture our growth, for friends who love us by choice, and for neighbors who share our burdens and daily tasks since we are in community.

We pray for all of those who struggle to find joy and hope this day, for those who are experiencing loss, addiction, incarceration, abuse, loneliness, isolation, physical or mental distress, illness and death. We lift these sisters and brothers before you and we wrap them in our own arms and prayers. You cherish these dear ones as your children and so we love them as our siblings.

For the gift of your presence in all things, both the good and the hard, we give you thanks eternal loving God, and we show our thanks by reciting the words that you taught us to pray together saying,

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Bekah Brudi plays guitar and sings "Who You Say I Am"

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Benediction and Blessing

Let us go forth from here today, strengthened by God's power, renewed by Christ's love and grace, and led by the Holy Spirit. Let's go out in hope.

And may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.