

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Feast of the Epiphany

January 9, 2022

Psalms 29:1–11 (ESV):

1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.

4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

6 He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

11 May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

1st Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:1–7 (ESV):

Israel's Only Savior

43 But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

3 For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

4 Because you are precious in my eyes,

and honored, and I love you,

I give men in return for you,

peoples in exchange for your life.

5 Fear not, for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you.

6 I will say to the north, Give up,

and to the south, Do not withhold;

bring my sons from afar

and my daughters from the end of the earth,

7 everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made.”

EPISTLE: Isaiah 43: 1-7 (ESV):

Israel's Only Savior

12 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. 2 You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. 3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

Gospel: Luke 3:15-22 (ESV):

15 As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, **16** John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

18 So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. **19** But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, **20** added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, **22** and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon 2 – Feast of the Epiphany

“God's Crazy Christmas”

Ephesians 3:1-13

Dear friends,

This epistle lesson is a lot to get through, admittedly. Paul is talking about something fairly simple, but the implications of it are complex, and he makes a lot of complex connections to other ideas. It's easy to get lost in all the words, so what today is going to be about is zooming in on the heart of what Paul is saying, and what we can learn from it. So what is Paul saying? He is saying that we Gentiles are saved just like Jews are saved, everyone is saved by believing that Jesus Christ suffered and died for their sins. Everything else Paul says is connected to that. I know I have talked about how much of a challenge this idea was for the early church before, we won't go into that, I want to instead talk about what this means for us. We don't think of ourselves as Gentiles, we think of ourselves as Christians, who our parents were, what our bloodline is, doesn't matter to us and that's good. What Paul reminds us is whether we are Jew or Gentile, whether we come from Africa, Asia, or America, none of us deserves to be where we are today. None of us earned this. That's the timeless part of the lesson that we should never forget.

He takes his sweet time getting there, though. Ephesians is six chapters, so this is the middle of the book. He's talked about sin in a general way before this, in chapter two. He also talks about the Ephesians themselves, how they're suffering for their confession of faith. He talks about the Ephesians advanced faith, the fact that they're veterans, they're old hats to Christianity, and he tells them that they are wise because of this. He urges them to draw on that wisdom, he tells them, use your sufferings to get to know Christ better, get to know His will better. He will go on to tell them how they can do that, by living pure, by making good choices, showing virtue, that kind of thing. But for now, chapter 3, he comes to the essence of the Christian message. He just starts with what sounds like a tangled spaghetti web of unfinished ideas.

“For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—
2 assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me
for you, 3 how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written
briefly. 4 When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,
5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now
been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Again, you've got a lot
going on here. His basic point is that Christ is the Lord and Savior of all people. That's fine,
we all know that. But Paul reminds them of this point by reminding them of his
credentials, of his genuine expertise in this matter. That seems strange to me at first, I
didn't get why Paul felt like he had to do that. Remember that Christianity is all connected,
though, and it is all connected to Jesus on the cross, suffering and dying for our sins. This
is something people need to be not just reminded of, but convinced of, and Paul reminds
the Ephesians that he convinced them because God Himself sent him to convince them.
He says that he – out of all the apostles and prophets, out of every pastor that God has
ever sent – has a special mission. His mission is to bring Jews and Gentiles together into
one church. That is explicitly what God tells Paul his life will be about. He is God's
missionary to do this. Why does Paul say this? He says this to remind them, again, that he
is the expert on this subject. The Holy Spirit is working through him, he has the knowledge
because God gave him and him alone the knowledge. He wants the Ephesians to believe
that no matter where they come from, no matter who their family is, what their home
country is, that Jesus is their Savior. Jesus saved the folks back east, and the ones out west
too. He saved the people from the north and the south. Paul is saying to them, I know this
best, you've heard my credentials, and I'm here to tell you this Jesus lived, suffered, and
died for each one of you. **“6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members**
of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

The challenge comes for us because this is so duh as to be hardly worth
mentioning. You and I were never Jews, there's never been a Jew in Bethel Lutheran
church that I know of, and so this is hardly a bombshell. But there is a lesson for us, here.
No one, Jew or Gentile, no matter where they come from, is worthy to be God's child. No

one is worthy of forgiveness or salvation or any of it. God takes great pains to explain to Abraham and to all the Jews that they are not special, that God chose them because God chose them, and that's where He stops explaining. The Jews were never special, God chose them to be His people because He decided that would be best. In the same way, you and I are not invited into God's own family on our own merits. We do not deserve the great mercy that we have here today, brothers and sisters, the absolutely incredible privilege of sitting in Christ's church asking Him for mercy and praying for our fellow Christians. One of the reasons the church has no interest at all in nationality or race is because it is beside the point, no matter where we come from, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Paul is marveling and sharing the joy that Jew and Gentile come together in the Christian church, because that was a big thing for his time. I urge you to marvel and share the joy that you, regardless of where you come from, are coming together in the Christian church. Jesus is holy. We are not. Instead of punishing us, Jesus took steps to make us holy, to bring us in rather than kicking us out.

“7 Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. 8 To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, 10 so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” So Paul goes back to his expertise again, and but he uses that as a springboard to segue into what He calls God's wisdom, or God's glory. He uses the two things somewhat interchangeably to talk about roughly the same thing. So what is he referring to? Well, think about it. Who would have thought of such a convoluted, crazy plan? You have sinners. You have sin. God created this world good, and we turned it all evil. Instead of destroying it, instead of being aggressive towards evil, God sets out to transform evil into good. He needs to punish evil, but instead of punishing us He punishes Jesus. Only God could have created a plan that twisted, that non-intuitive, and made it work out so well. Jesus is our perfect solution to our deepest problems. All the evils of the world, all the evils our lives and our selves, Jesus

purified us of those evils and kept our souls intact and alive. God did this while still dealing with evil. Only God could do something so crazy-sounding and still pull it off, and He did. God shows His genius, He shows us a better way, He shows us how to take the long view. More than showing us, though, God uses us to show the world how it should truly be done. We aren't just God's children, we're His showroom pieces, His art. That includes all of us. Paul says the whole church is there show the manifold wisdom of God, to be a living testimony how God can fix any problem, how God can save any sinner, and how God can punish evil while leaving the architects of that evil, that is, you and I, alive.

You might bristle at this, if you're like me. I'm a person, not a showpiece. I'm not some decoration on God's wall, and it feels demeaning to think of myself that way. Well, Paul tells us that's not all we are. **“11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.”** So Paul reminds us we aren't just things that God considers part of His collection. We're not teaching tools to God, or trophies. We're children. He tells us we are His eternal purpose. God is after us. He was always after us, to save us, and to forge a relationship with us to last eternity. He made that relationship possible by sending Jesus to snatch us from the fires of hell, and that sending continues into this day. He sent Jesus to you through the work of the Christians who made your faith possible. The ones who baptized you, the ones who taught you, and all your Christian friends who encouraged you throughout the years. God is behind all that. Paul says we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him. Like a favored child, you are front and center of God's plan of salvation, and that plan doesn't end when you get saved. It persists, as God works to keep you strong in His faith and school you through temptation and struggle and good times alike. That is why Paul refers to in the final verse of the chapter, which I included for this reason: **“13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.”** Paul repeatedly tells the Ephesians throughout the letter that his suffering is for their glory. Our access to God, God's crazy plan of bringing all men of every nation under heaven into one church, makes this happen. Our sufferings for each other become glory for each other. The sacrifices we make for

each other aren't made in a vacuum, they're not in vain, they're God's instruments of love for all of us.

Paul thought it was mind-blowing and crazy that Jews and non-Jews were brought together into church. You and I are used to that, but I urge you never to lose sight of how crazy it is that any of us are even here. We don't belong here. We don't deserve this. God makes us belong here, and He chooses to save us even when we don't deserve it..

Amen.