

With the Eyes of Your Heart Enlightened

Scriptures: Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23

Besides being the Sunday after Thanksgiving, today is the last Sunday in the church year: Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday we begin a new church year again with Advent. But today we mark the conclusion of this year now come full circle. What began with last December's season of Advent expectation comes to fulfillment in today's celebration of Christ's reign as the cosmic king of all Creation. And "*with the eyes of our hearts enlightened,*" as the Scripture says, we have come to know through the course of the year and through the revelation of our on-going experience, what was at first just the hope to which we were called by our loving and trustworthy God.

The passage we just read from Ephesians is a testament of thanksgiving for the gift of this gradual and on-going revelation, a great hymn of praise to Christ our King, bringing to a crescendo the majestic assertion that God has placed Christ "*over all things for the church, which is his body,*" and declaring that this humble man, Jesus of Nazareth, was actually the embodiment of God, and, as such, is the fulfillment of all things, now and forever, "*Amen.*"

"*Wow!*" we might exclaim, or "*Cosmic!*"... or even "*Awesome!*" (in the parlance of some of our kids). Yet as you marvel at the poetry of the passage, you might also find yourself struggling to comprehend its meaning, as did I, for the language and concepts of Ephesians 1 are strange and foreign to our 21st Century way of thinking.

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is both typical and a-typical of his other letters to early Christian congregations. It's typical in that it follows the familiar pattern of his other letters: it begins with a greeting, then offers a prayer for the congregation and an expression of thanksgiving for the people to which it's being addressed, followed by an exposition of his main theme, and finally closes with his salutations and greetings to particular people in the congregation to which the letter is being written. Ephesians is a classic epistle in this sense.

But it is a-typical of Paul's other letters in its language and thought forms. The mystical language about "*heavenly places*" far above all other "*powers and dominions,*" and expressions like "*the fullness of him who fills all in all*" are quite unique to Ephesians, and in fact may not have been written by Paul at all. Rather they may well be the language of a later disciple of Paul's, who wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus as late as 85 A.D., a full generation after Paul's first epistles were written, and long after Paul's death in Rome. This practice of writing under a pseudonym was not uncommon in that time and culture; for another author to attribute the letter of Ephesians to Paul was not viewed askance by its recipients. Rather, they understood the letter to contain the thoughts Paul would have written to them, were he still around to do so. So Ephesians, and some of Paul's other letters that scholars today believe were not actually written by him, should be understood by 21st Century Christians to be in the "school of thought of

Paul,” written by his disciples and followers to expand and apply his theology further along the same direction he began, but didn’t live long enough to complete.

In the same way as the church year expands the revelation of good news from Advent anticipation of a promised birth to Christ the King fulfillment of divine purpose, so these early Christians took the original teachings of Paul and adapted them to address new audiences living in the Greek and Roman world and familiar with Greek and Roman thought, rather than being limited just to Hebrew culture. And so you and I, living in the 21st Century today, are called to continue to expand and apply the message of Christ’s gospel to people and situations that, living in First Century A.D. Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth did not have the opportunity to do. We need to be true to the concepts contained in the original message, but as responsible agents of Christ the King, we need to adapt the language and thought forms of his gospel to faithfully challenge and engage people living in our 21st Century world.

Walter Brueggemann, the noted Old Testament Biblical scholar, describes some of the challenges 21st Century Christians face in living and applying the faith. God is dialogical in nature, Brueggemann asserts, wanting to engage humanity in a loving relationship with himself. There are elements both of conditional and unconditional love bound up in God’s relationship with us. It’s up to us to struggle with the complexity of what this means for how we understand God and how to live in relationship to God’s Creation and our fellow humans who inhabit it with us. Much like the church year is an on-going process of revelation, the “*Holy One*,” as Brueggemann refers to God, is never finished working on the relationship he initiated with humans. Brueggemann describes this active and involved God as “interactive, dialogical, and expecting to be changed” by her interaction with the Creation, not cast in concrete, but living, engaged and dynamic. So how do we successfully live in relationship to such a God today?

We can work at living in the on-going tension and complexity of the relationship, or we can retreat into two temptations, as Brueggemann characterizes them, that offer comforting escape hatches to the challenge of living in communion with this “dialogical,” dynamic God. One temptation is to retreat into absolutism, understanding God to be unchanging and immutable, demanding of a conformity of our thought and action that becomes oppressive and unforgiving when taken to an extreme. At the other end of the spectrum, the temptation is for us to retreat into autonomy, viewing ourselves and our world as no longer attached to God or our faith tradition, but believing, rather, that we can create our own reality, which we fashion with little or no regard or responsibility for the Creation or for anyone but ourselves. Brueggemann asserts that the first temptation presents a form of absolutist idolatry that results in rigid fundamentalism, while the second establishes an autonomous posture of careless atheism. Neither presents a helpful way for people to live in this 21st Century world. 1

The metaphor of sheep and shepherd that we hear in Psalm 100, in Psalm 23 and that is so pervasive throughout Judeo-Christian Biblical understanding, affirms that the community of faith, like sheep, is vulnerable to predators and susceptible to being led astray. It acknowledges a need for humans to live in a trusting, dependent relationship

with a shepherd/king who cares for them and watches out for them. Thus in our Judeo-Christian tradition, the community of faith gives itself over to a shepherd/Lord, and its worship is a free expression of the community's thanksgiving for belonging to such a relational, dialogical God. In a self-possessed culture like ours today, which champions autonomy and independence of thought and action, how do we effectively communicate the on-going revelation that we actually are dependent on a relationship with this cosmic, loving, all-powerful God whom we can trust and rely on?

I had an up-close and personal experience of sheep and shepherds when I visited South Africa several years ago, which helped me to appreciate the dynamic underlying this concept of how we're called to relate to God and how God relates to us. The village of Malungeni, where my congregation in St. Paul had sent me in 2008 with a team of 11 other volunteers to help build a church, lies in the midst of open, rolling hill country. Though the land is poor, it's suitable for grazing livestock. One afternoon I wandered up the hillside just east of the village, and the only other person I encountered there was a shepherd tending his sheep. By my take he was a simple man, probably about my age, with a dark, weathered, gentle face. He spoke only Xhosa, and I spoke only English, so our verbal interaction was limited. But I gestured with my camera that I'd like to take his picture, and he agreed, indicating that he wanted a picture of him with his sheep. There was only one in evidence, so I obliged, and he smiled broadly when I showed him the image on the digital playback screen. We then parted, and he headed down the hill with his sheep behind him as I continued on up the hill, alone, or at least so I thought. After a few minutes of climbing I heard a bleating sound and the tread of little hooves behind me. Another sheep, which had appeared out of nowhere, was now following me, assuming, mistakenly, that I was its shepherd. I stopped in my tracks and turning around to face it, I tried to shoo it away, saying, "*Go on, go away! I'm not your shepherd!*" The poor creature seemed quite confused, and stood there bleating at me pathetically, expecting me to lead it toward home down the hill, when I was still intent on going up to the top. Finally the sheep came to the revelation that I, indeed, was a pretty poor excuse for a shepherd, and losing interest in me, it eventually wandered off down the hill, looking for better leadership material. Unfortunately my friend, the true shepherd, was by this point just a tiny speck in the distance, indiscernible to weak sheep eyes.

What a peaceful place it was. How slow and simple, the pace of life in Malungeni. How much closer to the Biblical world of sheep and shepherds than the frantic-paced over-functioning world of high anxiety that I inhabit along with you, this post-modern world of high technology and autonomous, deracinated, neurotic people who think and act as though they live entirely on their own, out of any relationship with their neighbors or with a loving, knowing, caring God.

As our news is so full of terrorist attacks, sexual misconduct allegations, threats of nuclear war with North Korea, and our on-going domestic political rancor this Fall, do you find yourself, along with me, longing for a different world and a different approach to living than what we've got, an approach that sees life through the eyes of a faith that trusts in a good and caring God, who like a shepherd, guards and gently leads and guides his sheep? And "*with the eyes of our hearts enlightened,*" can't we begin to trust "*in the*

hope to which he has called us,” ... and in the “immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe...”?

Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner has written several spiritual memoirs of his life, one of which he calls: The Eyes of the Heart: A Memoir of the Lost and Found. In it he writes of our passage from Ephesians, “*St. Paul, or whoever it was, wrote to the Ephesians that he always remembered them in his prayers, asking God, among other things, to give them a ‘spirit of revelation in the knowledge of him,’ which is just about what you would expect him to ask. But then he added an explanatory phrase that I for one would not have expected and maybe for that reason never even noticed until it jumped off the page at me the other day – ‘having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.’*”²

I believe having the “*eyes of our hearts enlightened that we may know what it the hope to which God has called us*” is exactly what we’re so in need of, living in this world of recriminations and heightened anxiety that we Americans inhabit in 2017. This is the message of the gospel that as 21st Century Christians we need to interpret and convey to our neighbors in need, who are caught with us in this downward spiral of cultural and political decay.

Buechner writes further: “*I have seen with the eyes of my heart the great hope to which (God) has called us, but out of some shyness or diffidence I rarely speak of it... for fear of losing the ear and straining the credulity of the readers to whom such hope seems just wishful thinking...*”³ He goes on to say, “*If it is true about God, then ... there is nothing to worry about, not even death, not even life, not even losing the ones you love most in the world because... no one is ever really lost. If it is true, you would live out your days as one who ... in the deepest, most final sense is without fear. That is a level of faith beyond my reach, but at least (I’ve) caught a glimpse of it... There (is) nothing to worry about. There (is) no reason to fear. It (is) all of it, **all** of it, forever and always, good.*”⁴

“*Well, ‘Amen and Amen’ is all I can say,*” writes Buechner. “*Let it be true because I want it to be true. I feel in my bones that it is true. Sometimes I feel that it is beginning to be true, at least a little, even in me.*”⁵

So “*with the eyes of our hearts enlightened,*” let’s go out this Thanksgiving season sharing a spirit of wisdom and revelation from the God of our Lord Jesus Christ that we as people of faith have come to know by heart: that in spite of everything, we all of us are the “*sheep of God’s pasture.*” Yes, let’s “*enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.*” Let’s “*give thanks to him, and bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*”⁶

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, from his sermon at the Covenant Network Conference held at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, MN., 11/7/08

2. Frederick Buchner, The Eyes of the Heart, Harper San Francisco, c. 1999, p. 165
3. Ibid., p. 180
4. Ibid., p. 181
5. Ibid., p. 177
6. Psalm 100, verse 4 & 5, from The Holy Bible, NRSV translation, Thomas Nelson Publishers, c. 1989