

Sermon Notes for July 29, 2012  
Comments Delivered at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood  
House

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*Surpassing*

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*Praised be the maker of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens!*

This is how Paul begins his Letter to the Ephesians.

*All the spiritual blessings in heaven.* What does that mean? What does it mean? What are all the spiritual blessings in heaven? Does Paul know? He himself later tells us that he doesn't know. *He just knows that it is true that every spiritual blessing in the heavens has been bestowed on us through Christ Jesus.*

He goes on,

*Before the world began, God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless and to be full of love; God like-wise predestined us through Christ Jesus to be adopted children—such was God's pleasure and will—that everyone*

*might praise the glory of God's grace which was freely bestowed on us in God's beloved, Jesus Christ.*

God chose us to be holy and blameless in Christ; in other words— Jesus Christ was sent by God to make up for everything that had ever been done before that kept us from God; furthermore – we were predestined to be full of love; we were always God's children, never meant to be separated and in Jesus Christ the parent-love of God for God's children; the wiping out of all that was sin—separating us from the love of God—had now vanished by the presence of God's son, Jesus Christ. Gotta love Paul...

*It is in Christ and through the blood of Christ that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor given to us with perfect wisdom and understanding. God has taken pleasure in revealing the mystery of the plan through Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time; namely to bring all things—in heaven and on earth—together in Christ.*

To bring all things together in heaven and earth. What is it that gives Paul this broad, cosmic insight? What has him sounding almost as if he were standing over here, reporting on all these things, as if he had watched God and Jesus and had a chance to interview them both, then taking his reporting on the road--explaining all of the universe and God and Jesus' role in it and what God wanted for us from the beginning and has brought to us through Christ Jesus? Where does he get this?

*In Christ we were willed an inheritance; for in the decree of God—and everything is administered according to the divine will and counsel—we were predestined to praise the glory of the Most High by being the first to hope in Christ. In Christ, you, too, were chosen. When you heard the Good News of salvation, the word of truth, and delivered in it, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the pledge of our inheritance, the deposit paid against the full redemption of a people who are God's own—to the praise of God's glory.*

Paul says this is so. But who is he to say so? More, why should we listen to him today? What makes him such an expert, evangelist, apparent confidant of God, Jesus, and Spirit—so much so that he appears to have, by his own admission—insight beyond his understanding and ours?

This is big, expansive mystical stuff that he speaks about with absolute authority—for his time, but for ours?

Whenever I prepare a sermon or help others in preparing theirs, I always consider the questions,

- “How much more will people know about me and the meaning of these words I am about to speak in my own life when I am done?
- How much will I reveal about who God is in my life, believing that maybe others will come to believe that such things are possible in their own lives?
- Who am I to even consider preaching?”

So, let's ask these questions of Paul, in a way. We all know that Paul was originally named Saul. He was a Jew, a Roman citizen and a persecutor of the early followers of Jesus. He was one of the men who cooperated in the killing of Stephen, the first martyr following the death of Jesus. Born in Tarsus and raised in Jerusalem, he was part of the group once admonished by Gamliel, a leading authority in the Sanhedrin – or Supreme Court of ancient Israel, who told those persecuting the followers of Jesus to “refrain” from slaying the followers of Jesus.

He was, among other things—as was Moses, a murderer. God seems to be able to use anyone God wants.

Think about Paul having been who he was for a moment. Think about the dark and empty place one comes from who persecutes and murders others as part of a group of thugs and villains, defending their ideology with violence. Think about the middle of the first century in Jerusalem—think about the riots and civil wars we know of and are raging in parts of the world. Think of the extermination camps of World War II. This is Saul's world—in his world and similar times in ours. He was one of the tormented guys tormenting others.

And it was from this place that he was rescued—perhaps never even knowing he needed to be rescued. Tradition tells us that as he traveled on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus on a mission to “bring them which were bound [Christians] unto Jerusalem,” the resurrected Jesus

appeared to him in a great light, struck him blind for three days, and touched him in a way—maybe you know. When his sight returned he became one of the most prolific evangelists of the Good News, as well as one of the most prominent early Christian leaders.

To say he had a change of heart is, in itself, an understatement of cosmic proportions.

His life was changed. Heaven and Earth and all beyond were somehow connected in ways of a transformed vision and being—inside and out, in such a way that were he a rock – he would still cry out. He had no choice, so filled was he with the Holy Spirit than to bring his message to others; hoping that by the power of the Holy Spirit they would believe as he did. And when bad times befell him, jail, beatings and his own persecution—he saw it all as part of his glorifying God.

Talk about change!

It is important to remember that those listening to Paul would have known of his story. They likely would have heard of him as the persecutor, maybe even felt his wrath, and now see him before them as Paul-charismatic, persuasive, tireless, and filled with zeal. Holy, even. And, many believed because of him.

Paul was a living example of what the power of this Savior he spoke of, this Jesus of Nazareth who was killed some twenty years before—

he was a living example, a miracle if you like, that convinced other to come to believe that what it was he had—was possible for them.

That what they had longed for in being loved, at peace, assured of God's cosmic embrace for them—all this and more, salvation, redemption, and all the spiritual gifts of heaven were theirs—if they would just believe; give it a try.

And many did try and many believed and many lives were changed from those days forward.

For me, it is important to know that I am not Paul. But I am like Paul. I have had times in my life where I have lived in ways and behaved in ways that hurt others. No, I never killed anyone—but I could have if my conditions had been a little different, if the groups I hung with were a little different.

In my own ways, I felt the goodness of God in childhood slip away, become foreign, distant, unreliable based on the teachings I had been given. There were dark days, months, years when the distance between me and God seemed far away and there was little I could do to change it.

And then, as God does, some things happened. It took time, but I came to know God the God of my Understanding – as the God beyond all understanding. The God that was with me in the brightest of days and the most difficult of days, the God who beyond anything I

understood held us all in unity and great, fulfilling love. The more I accepted this love, acted “as if” it was always there—the more it was, to the degree where I don’t need to understand how it all works. I just know that it does, and I rely on God fully in my life, trusting in God that beyond all the theological arguments and biblical debates—God is and is with me and you and all this world and beyond. And through that Love of God I, and you, and all this world and beyond are a part of something so great and wonderful that all its promise is ahead.

All the spiritual gifts of heaven have been given to us, just as Paul has said.

Last week we talked about how important it is to rest, pray, meditate. This week we add to that, giving thought during those times and others how it is that God has changed our lives. What are the stories we have to tell others. In September, I will be asking those who wish to share a few minutes of their story of God, conversion, or longing for the God who has yet to arrive. I hope you will participate in this sharing of our stories on the third Sunday of September.

For, you see, these evangelists and the writers of the Old and New Testament wrote not to describe history—but to tell of transformation in their lives because of their relationship with God. They told of these stories because they knew what was possible in terms of coming into relationship with God and one another—and they wanted it for all to know.