

“Getting to Know You”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2020
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Holy Scriptures: Luke 24: 44-53 Ephesians 1: 15-23

Resources:

Charles Cousar, et al, Texts for Preaching—Year A

Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, The People’s New Testament Commentary

Luke 24: 44-53

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Ephesians 1: 15-23

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know Christ, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when [the Lord] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

SERMON

The Apostle Paul, a servant of the Lord,
is most likely the author of at least seven books in the New Testament.

Romans
First Corinthians
Second Corinthians
Galatians
Philippians
First Thessalonians
Philemon

As you know, there's an 8th book in the NT whose authorship is undisputed: *Revelation*.

The book of Ephesians,
written right around the same time as Paul died,
circa 64,
was most likely written by one of Paul's associates.

No shock here.

A common practice in Biblical times
was to speak and write in the name of a revered spiritual leader,
to attribute writings to one who is admired.

Consider the first 5 books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Pentateuch:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

They are attributed to Moses.

Isaiah is in actuality 3 books:

the first 39 chapters are by the original Prophet Isaiah;
the next 16 chapters are by two followers writing in his name.

The Psalms as a whole are attributed to David,
when in fact he did not write all 150.
Some Psalms appear to have been written by women.

Wisdom materials were collected and attributed to Solomon.

So, when Ephesians opens: "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*"
take it as a follower's compliment directed at Paul,
as a nod from the student who closely followed in Paul's wake
to the teacher who testified and modeled Christian love.

There is evidence that Ephesians was written someone close to Paul.

Could have been Tychicus, who is mentioned at the end of the letter.

"Tychicus will tell you everything.

*He is a dear brother and faithful minister of the Lord.
I am sending him to you for this very purpose..."*

Could be a hidden figure,
a silent soul whose name is lost to history
yet whose impact is transformational.

Scholars teach us that the vocabulary and style of Ephesians
differ from the 7 books we know are Paul's.

Circa 64, Paul wrote Philippians from prison in the purest of Greek,
while at the same time Ephesians was being set down in more common Greek.

There are theological differences.
Paul anticipated the return of Jesus.
We know that Paul expected Christ to return;
he spoke often of the Second Coming of Christ.

The author of Ephesians adopted a more nuanced slant.
The author is clearly a student of Pauline theology,
yet brings a deeper, fuller theology to bear.
The teachings of Paul are amplified and more fully explained in Ephesians,
describing how they relate in our day to day living,
in the building of the Beloved Community.

For example, Paul affirmed the tension of the already and the not yet.
Christ came, Christ will come again.
Paul anticipates the exaltation of Christ, yet the event has not yet happened.

Ephesians, however, ties God's resurrection power with the working of the church, now.
Ephesians' focus is on the present expression and experience of the Faith.
No future anticipation here:

the power of God has been given by Christ to empower the church.
Rather than wait for a Second Coming,
the church is empowered to be evidence of God's love, now.
The church is a living prayer.
We are a living prayer, a prayer put to work, to build and plant, to serve and share.

They say a child was being squirmy in church,
so wiggly his dad scooped him up and started down the church aisle,
headed toward the doors.
The child looked over his shoulder at the congregation
and called out, "Y'all pray for me now!"

Ephesians concentrates on the present-day reality in which we live:
the present-day status and mission of followers of Christ,
who is already risen and seated in heaven by God's side.

“That Christ has already triumphed
means that the church itself
will surely be sustained by God’s power.” (Cousar, p.315)

Paul invited us to be **in** the Body of Christ.
Ephesians proclaims that the church is the Body **of** Christ.

The genesis of this theology, that the church is the Body of Christ,
is found in the ascension of Christ.
In the beginning was the ascension.
When Christ ascended,
He commissioned believers to be the Body of Christ in the world.
He bestowed gifts upon those who follow the God of grace and glory.
With these gifts, with the commissioning,
we become Christ’s Body at work and play in the world today.

Ephesians is written as a circular, like a tract, a brochure that is passed around,
a letter meant to be shared by a variety of house churches.

Letters like this one were received and read aloud in worship,
passed on from house church to house church,
the Body of Christ sheltering in place,
in many places, in many homes and hamlets,
yoked by a covenant of love.

As a matter of fact, the first half of Ephesians is liturgy for worship.
The second portion is practical, spiritual teaching
on how to embody God’s love
in everyday relationships and in the wider community.

Ephesians begins with affirmations that God identifies us as God’s beloved.
Worship begins by celebrating our connection to the Holy, who claims us as God’s own.

We are marked, said the author of Ephesians.
We’re inheritors
Blessed
Chosen
Destined
Adopted
Called
Beloved
Redeemed
Forgiven
Lavished with grace
The mystery of God’s will is made known to us
We are hearers of the Word
We are marked with the seal and promise of the Holy Spirit

We who set our hope on Christ live for the praise of His glory
(How did the author know my story?)

We confess, we admit, we acknowledge that
Once we were dead
Dead through sin
Trespasses
Lost hope
Following our own desires
Succumbing to temptations
Children of wrath, of anger, behaving like everyone else
(How did the author know my story?)

Once dead, God loved us into being new creations
Once dead, in Christ we are made alive
(How did the author know my story?)

By grace we have been saved through faith
Raised up, like Christ, to live
Created in Christ for good works
Created in Christ to be God's dreams made real, God with some skin on it

Once we were far off
Now we are brought close by the redeeming love of God
Once we were far off
Now we have access to God through the Spirit
Once we were far off
Now we are built into a dwelling for God, together

Ephesians offers an intercessory prayer that, shall we say, has legs.

*"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...
may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know Christ,
so that...you may know what is the hope to which he has called you,
what are the riches of his glorious inheritance
among the saints,
and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe,
according to the working of his great power.
[The Greek word for working is ENERGIA]
God put this power to work [ENERGEO = put to work]
in Christ when [the Lord] raised him from the dead
and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places"*

Ephesians' worship liturgy is infused
with the call to let the ENERGIA of God
to flow through you, through the Church,
to put to work, ENERGEO, God's power into practice.

Ephesians then shifts from worship and praise
to exploring ways and means to put to work--to energize--the Body of Christ.

“I beg you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

Live with humility

Gentleness

Patience

Unity in the spirit

*“There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to one hope when you were called;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
one God and [Creator] of all,
who is over all and through all and in all.” (4: 4-6)*

Each of us is a receiver of God’s gifts [CHARISMATA],
and each of us has divine gifts to share.

Ephesians references Psalms 68: 18

“When he ascended on high...and gave gifts to his people.”

Before Christ ascended, He distributed talents, yes, but also people!
Christ calls then empowers people to serve, to lead and follow and make a difference.

*“He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,
to equip his people for works of service, [there’s that ENERGY again!]
so that the body of Christ may be built up
until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge
of the Son of God
and become mature,
attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (4: 11-13)*

Becoming, Growing, Seeking spiritual maturity, wisdom, clarity of insight
Questioning, Wondering, Conversing people
Working and Serving and Feeding one another
Sound like anyone you know? Sound like a church family you know?
Imagine such a Body of Christ filled with ENERGIA, CHARISMATA, KOINONIA!!!

*Be kind to one another
Tenderhearted
Forgiving as Christ has forgiven you*

*Be angry but do not sin
Do not let the sun go down on your anger*

In other words, by resolving disputes before you sleep,

the next day is a new day,
each morning welcomes a fresh start.
Best marital advice, hands down.
Here comes some radical relational advice

Much attention is feasted upon the next line,
a line we in this age recognize as sexist advice
“Wives: be subject to your husband.”
The next word that follows is as radical a message as any in the NT
“Husbands: love your wife like you do your own body.”
This is followed up by advising:
Slaves, do what you do to the glory of God.
Masters, stop threatening your slaves.
You share the same Master in heaven as your slaves.

I stand before you today, affirming the horrors and evil of slavery,
acknowledging there are more slaves today than 150 years ago,
admonishing my ancestry and the church’s part in supporting slavery.
This scripture has been used and abused by the Church to justify slavery,
racism, and the oppression of one people by another.
I also accept that this Word in Ephesians was transformational in its own light.

Again, a radical message of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, who loves all.
Wives, husbands, slaves, masters:
you all have the same Master, the same God
All means all.
Or, as we say in the South, y’all means all.

God is still speaking, and the Body of Christ is still serving.
Loving
Giving
Questioning
Conversing
Healing
Blessing
Growing in wisdom and clarity of insight and into spiritual maturity

So good to know we have been declared essential!
Are you like me, did it do your heart good to hear on national TV we are essential?
Churches, temples, mosques, all declared essential like package stores
Yes, indeed, we are essential because of our values
Our behavior
Our contributions to making a difference
Essential Bodies of Christ like this one in the heart of Decatur
are sheltering in place
because we care so deeply
about the health and healing of all of God’s people.

Our buildings remain closed while the curve has yet to decline
Our buildings are closed,
 but the Church is wide open, wide awake, wide-eyed and aware
We understand that so many are tired of being cooped up, isolated, lonely.
We get it that compassion fatigue has set in
We get to feeling numb,
 when the volume of the numbers of sick and suffering and lost
 is beyond what our comprehension or compassion can take

To we who are giving our all in all,
who are tired,
fatigued,
lost,
afraid,
mourning,
wondering,
questioning,
standing stalwart for the Faith,
all or none of the above,
Ephesians speaks to us, the Body of Christ, here and now:

*“Be strong in the Lord!
Stand tall!
Fight the good fight!
Keep the faith!
Pray for me as I am praying for you!”*

The church is a living prayer.

We are a living prayer, a prayer put to work, to build and plant, to serve and share.

So, my friends, *“Put on the armor of God,
so that you may be able to stand against the devices of the devil.”*
In the face of the principalities and powers,
 we are invited to put on the very armor God wears!
Each piece of armor symbolizes the qualities of God.
Put on the belt of truth.
Wear the breastplate of righteousness.
Put on the shoes of readiness to preach the gospel of peace.
Take with you a shield of faith.
Place on your head the helmet of salvation.
Advance on the forces of evil with the shield of faith.

Your only offensive weapon is to be a sword,
 the sword of the Spirit,
 which is the Word of God.

When do you put on the armor of God?
Our church young people read their Bibles and addressed this question

I put on the Gospel armor whenever I walk home at night in the dark.
I put on the Gospel armor when my friend became an addict and offered me some.
I put on the Gospel armor when teacher announces a pop quiz.
I put on the Gospel armor when I take home the grade I got from the pop quiz.
I put on the Gospel armor when friends pressure me to do things I know aren't right.
I put on the Gospel armor every morning when I get up and start my day!

“Therefore take up the whole armor of God,
so that you may be able to withstand...
and having done everything, to stand firm.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!