

Ephesians 3:14-21
November 21, 2021
"BEYOND All We Can Ask or Imagine"
Rev. Randy Smith

Let me begin this morning by saying that I **know what you are thinking** and, *yes*, you are correct. I did, in fact, preach on the Scripture Reading for today, only a few months ago, back in early August of this year -- as I'm sure almost all of you will remember -- right? But, let me reassure you: that was *then*, and this is *now*, and today's sermon will not be a repeat of the sermon in August, the big reason for that being, of course, **BEYOND**, and today being the Commitment Sunday which your Steering Team of fellow members has been working toward since last May.

Today, I want us to think mainly about the **doxology** Paul uses to *close* this part of his letter:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish *abundantly far more than* all we can *ask or imagine*, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

You'll notice that, for the sermon title this morning, I substituted "Beyond" for "abundantly far more", and I honestly think it's a *valid* substitution. Paul has spent the first **two** chapters of his letter laying out what I referred to in the August sermon as his "mature" theology, *viz.*, a "**big picture**" overview of all that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ means, and makes possible, for the life of the world. And that "big picture" is truly, astoundingly **huge**: the ultimate point and purpose of Jesus was -- and is -- to **unite all the peoples of the earth** into the **worship of God**. As Paul talks about in 2:16-22, Jesus "came and proclaimed **peace**" to all, "putting to *death*" by his death on the cross all the "**hostility**" which different groups of human beings might ever have toward one another, so that we might all be "joined together and grow into a holy temple in the Lord...a dwelling place for God" in the world.

Is that not a truly, astoundingly huge, vision for humanity? The correct answer, by the way, is "Yes."

And Paul, as he composes this letter to the Christian congregations in and around what was, in the 1st-c. AD, the important seaport of Ephesus, on the southwest coast of modern day Turkey, **knows** this. The vision **is** huge -- in fact, *so* huge, *so* incomprehensible, that Paul has spent the *third* chapter of his letter, from which we read this morning, saying to the churches, that it is imperative that they **believe** and **trust** this to be true, *nevertheless*.

And, really, **we** -- here today -- are *we* not in the same position? Here, two millennia later, are we not really struggling, as much or more, as those early Christian congregations, to believe, and trust, this to be true? Haven't we actually -

- effectively -- come to "**handle**" the Christian gospel -- to *receive* it, yes, but also to *shape* it as we receive it, which means **conform** it, which really means **reduce** it **down** to "all **we** can ask or imagine"? Haven't we actually, i.e., effectively **disbelieved**, and **distrusted** the truth of the gospel as Paul lays it out for us in Ephesians?

What I mean is that I believe -- generally speaking, and to far too great a degree -- we have given up on the **real** life of our **real** world ever being much different than we have *known* it to be -- and *expected*, and even, for *some* of us, *wanted* it to be -- across our lifetimes. We are not thinking that "proclaiming peace" to all is going to help much in Kenosha, WI, or down in Brunswick, GA. We are frankly unable to "imagine" that black and white, armed and unarmed, fearful and refusing to live by fear, is going to change much in our everyday lives. No, hostility, and division, and mutual fear is the order of the day. About **the best** we can do -- **even** we who claim that our first loyalty is to Jesus Christ and the kingdom he came proclaiming, and inaugurating with his own self-giving love -- about the *best* we can do is hunker down, and try to stay out of the line of fire.

Just yesterday, as I was scanning the radio channels, I stumbled across a song by an artist whose name I'd heard of but who I didn't know anything about. His name is TobyMac and, according to Wikipedia, he is an "American Christian hip hop rapper and singer", and a 7-time Grammy award winner. His latest song was playing, a song called "Promised Land". Both the music and the lyrics caught my attention and caused me to stop scanning and listen. In those lyrics he speaks from the point of view of the average, clock-punching, American working man, and he says:

Well, I've run this Earth for many years
If there's one thing I know
There's nowhere on this side o' Heaven
Where streets are made o' gold
I've long laid aside my grand illusions
Lookin' toward the day that I'll be home
Through all these seasons
I'm still believin'
You're my promised land
In all my grievin'
I'm still believin'
You're my promised land

In an interview about the song, he said:

The lyrics land where I want my life to land—that the promised land is **no land at all**, but a relationship with the King who loves us deeply...Maybe the promised land we're looking for is **no place at all**, but a person named Jesus.

And this is -- isn't it? -- where the great majority of TobyMac's fellow American Christians are living. But, doesn't this explicitly contradict the story of our forebears in faith -- the original Covenant People of God, for whom the "Promised Land" was all about a very *particular* **land** and *place* on planet earth, *in which* they were commanded to live a very *particular* way of life-together, distinct from the peoples around them, in order to witness before them who God is, and how God desires all people to live? Haven't we, i.e., *relocated* the "Promised Land" to some realm *other than* the *real* life of our *real* world -- maybe morphed it into some way of trying, simply, to **cope** with the *real* life of our *real* world, all the terrors and trials, stresses and strains, disappointments and dashed hopes or, i.e., in the experience of "all [our] *grievin*"?

Which makes the challenge, then, for St. Matthew Church, in the early 21st-c., and in the 7th decade of our life as a Christian congregation, is to make it evident -- by our willingness to make an admittedly extraordinary investment of our financial resources -- that we **do** believe and trust in the gospel as Paul lays it out here to be true, that how we live our real lives in the real world -- here and now, in this place and time, -- is actually all-important, and that we are willing to give sacrificially on account of that belief and trust.

All across the OT, there is the idea that certain **places** are special, are sacred, because of the presence of God, and/or the special activity of God, there. I've been thinking about this since my first sermon in this series, based on Dt. 14, where it talks about "**the place** that [the Lord] will choose as a dwelling for his name" (v. 23). It was the place where all the people -- from wealthy farmers to the migrants who picked their fields -- were to gather, if you remember, to **celebrate** the **feast** their **tithe** made possible for all to share, the tithe *itself* being a **celebration of their trust in God** to continue to provide enough for all.

St. Matthew has for many years already *been*, and promises for many more years to *be*, a "place that [the Lord] will choose as a dwelling for his name". Across the years to come, neither you nor I can know for sure what use God will make of this place. But we can know for sure that by our investment today in maintaining a place where God's name dwells -- and the gospel is proclaimed, and people are challenged to believe and trust in it, and **shape** their lives and relationships *accordingly* (and *not* shape the *gospel* according to their lives and relationships) -- we will be making a unique and important Methodist Christian way for God to be present, and acting, in this community, "**BEYOND** -- honestly -- all we can ask or imagine".