

Lent IV

Sometimes the Scriptures sing, and our lesson from Ephesians today is one such passage. It is full of joy, rife with thanksgiving, overflowing of holy wonder. It speaks to the heart of the Gospel and in the most beautiful terms, perhaps the terms that a people like us most need to hear. For it is a joyful life of praise that remakes the human heart, a deep awareness of God's loving, saving power, that makes a life whole. Such joyful praise is most authentic when it is grounded in an honest repentance.

And so Paul (?) begins with some tougher stuff, three images of despair.

You were dead, he says, a corpse, in the power of sin.

You were ruled, slaves, to a ruler of disobedience.

You were children of wrath, and maybe worst of all,
you were just like everyone else, horror of horrors then and now.

You were nothing special.

And then he writes two beautiful words that turn everything around: **But God**.

You know people love that phrase.

In the midst of general destruction, Genesis says "**But God** remembered Noah" and preserved him.

Joseph says in the same book, to his murderous brothers, "You intended to harm me, **but God** intended it for good."

Or as Peter preached in Acts 3, "You killed the author of life, **but God** raised him from the dead." So here, "**But God**, who is rich in mercy...out of great love...made us alive in Christ...for by grace you have been saved."

From that great turning point in the passage comes a lyrical build, swelling, poetic affirmations of the great goodness of God in Christ and the grace and peace in which we now dwell, solely by the gift of God.

This might remind of you of many things:

Say the second movement of a symphony, marked by the composer with dreary notations like *adagio* and *andante*, leading to music full of brooding emotion and dark tones and tension:

"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient."

But then the audience is treated to a movement marked *allegro* by the composer, brisk, lively, and cheerful, perhaps a fourth and final movement that brings the enraptured audience to its feet.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God!"

"Bravo!" we cry.

Or of the worship of the church, this Sunday and many others,

When we begin with a prayer that asks for the God who sees in secret to cleanse us well enough to be worthy to worship.

Or when we begin with a confession of sin and a dwelling on the commandments that remind us of the horrible, death-dealing, destructive ways that we may use our power and freedom.

We start that way but still will feel ourselves drawn to the Table,

Where the Lord gives himself to us,

Where experience a foretaste of the Kingdom of God,

Where we feast with the saints who have gone before,

In a moment that transcends death and sin and is a glimpse of heaven.

And we finish singing, up from our knees, something glorious like what we sing today at the end of the liturgy, the Welsh hymn, *Guide Me O Though Great Jehovah*,

A hymn seeped into the seats of Westminster Abbey by its frequent use on state occasions, and one so stirring that Welsh rugby fans sing it at their matches.

Which makes me think of a sort of counter example: we don't sing hymns at football games, do we?

We sing fight songs and listen to hip-hop blasted from the Jumbotron.

The game starts loud, with the proclaimed invincibility of the team.

Highlights from previous victories are shown; never anything from the losses.

Theological claims are made.

At the games my wife takes me to, Larry Munson speaks from the grave each Saturday, saying "there is no tradition more worthy of envy. No institution worthy of such loyalty as The University of Georgia."

"Not even the Christian church?" I always think.

Ball games, of course, don't always end on a high note as our worship often does, as many symphonies do.

I have been in the stadium many time when the home team let it slip away in the last seconds.

And they don't have any sad music to play or solemn graphics to show.

The home fans groan and then head for the exits.

There is no organized lamentation; the cheery music and graphics just keep coming.

A song of hope is not sung in witness against the loss.

So this little bit of Ephesians then, shows us the wonderful realism of the Gospel.

We have been in trouble and will be again.

The world shows too many signs of the power of sin and the violence and injustice we are capable of.

And all that needs to be admitted for our hope to be real.

I hope the church is never like a football stadium, where the possibility of loss, of insufficiency is never stated.

Better we begin like that second movement of symphony, when the possibility of a bad outcome and triumph of dark forces seems possible.

And from there, we can begin to sense that a great force beyond ourselves, the loving power of God, can save us.

The closing words of this Ephesian song set up those who sing it for a wonderful new life.
For we are what he has made us,
created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.
How wonderful to know yourself to be that, made and remade in Christ for good work, prepared
for holy love from the foundation of the world.
What strength and confidence come from knowing that is who you are,
What capacity for peaceful living, for life in community, for living hopefully among the real pain
and tragedy of our world.
The song of the Gospel is to be heard and meant to be joined, it is the song of a world made new.
It is a song that transforms those who make it their own.