

COMMISSIONED FOR GRACE
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
January 3, 2021
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
Epiphany Sunday

Based on Ephesians 3:1-6. The Mystery Makes Us One.

There has been, let us confess, too much death.

More than we can fathom.

Three hundred fifty thousand fellow citizens and counting, in this country alone.

The equivalent of a 9/11 event ... every single day.

Where is the grace of God in that?

A new calendar invites us to turn the page. To say "good riddance" to the way things have been. To start the new year off right. To leave "all that death" behind.

But things are getting worse, not better. The long, slow slog is, in many ways, just beginning. And even our efforts to point the proverbial finger – to blame the incompetence and the callous cruelty unfolding in our midst that has made this crisis worse than it needed to be – even that takes more effort than seems worth it at this point.

And where is the grace of God in that?

The truth is, we are failing. Not necessarily you or me individually, but we as a nation. As a species. And we – you and me – in our predominantly white, western, middle class, first world, high achieving way of life are not necessarily well-acquainted with finding the grace of God through failure.

For most of the biblical experience, however, slogging through abject failure and cruelty and incompetence – our own, and the fallout from the failure of others – has actually been the most powerful way to glimpse the grace of God. And, through that grace, to know the steadfast never failing never quitting always faithful LOVE that truly is from everlasting to everlasting.

Take, for example, the letter to the Ephesians that is our Scripture lesson today. Attributed to Paul – but most likely written by one of his students – this letter confronts the major theological failure of the early church: the spread of the belief that the resurrection of Jesus meant the end of their suffering was near, that Jesus would return in glory any day now, and that the reign of God was on the cusp of coming in its fullness.

The number one failure of the early Christian message: that the resurrection of Jesus is a sign of the imminent reign of God. Right from the beginning, our tradition gets the message *wrong*.

Instead, by the time the Ephesians receive this letter, decades have passed. The suffering has gotten worse. The glorified Christ swooping in to save the day is nowhere in sight. The long slow slog – for them, too – has only just begun.

In light of our failure, the author responds in this letter, in light of our utter misunderstanding of the message of resurrection, perhaps we need to take a longer view of the mystery of Christ.

Yes, the author implies, we remain in many ways “imprisoned” by this temporal suffering. Suffering we *thought* was near its end. But there is a deeper mystery in this, the author insists. A “commission,” if you will. To bear the good news of *glimpses* of the grace of God. Not – at least yet – in the fullness we promised at first. But witnessed at least by some of us in various revelations.

I, Paul, the author says in Paul’s name, am one who has experienced such a revelation. A glimpse of eternity, if you will. Given to me. *For you*. So that in sharing this gift of grace with you, we may be made one, in our shared suffering, in our shared failure, in our shared experience of grace.

Because of that revelation, the author says in Paul’s name, instead of feeling imprisoned by this temporal suffering, I am now imprisoned by that eternal grace. And because I am no longer imprisoned in this temporal suffering, the grace of God can fill me with compassion for you in your suffering. Yes, yours: Ephesians, Gentiles, the very people I used to claim as my mortal enemies.

I, Paul, the author says in Paul’s name, am now commissioned to guide you to that same grace. It may come in glimpses at first. But I promise once you learn how to recognize it, you will come to know it in greater fullness. You, like me will be so enamored of that grace that you will let yourself become imprisoned by it! “Caged in,” in a manner of speaking, by this gift of grace and the view from eternity, that you will actually feel free! No longer imprisoned by temporal suffering. Because we – you and I – through that shared experience of grace become the living Body of Christ in our time and place: a provisional demonstration of the reign of God for which we say we pray.

A former spiritual director of mine said the same thing about eight years ago when I asked how she had developed the capacity to hold my stories of failure with a grace I had not known to that point.

And she said,

It was in my mid-thirties, when I was pregnant with my sixth child [she was Catholic, after all!], when my husband had to rush me to the hospital with bacterial meningitis. For the first time in my life, I had to trust my children to another family. For the first time in my life, I had to face the reality of my own mortality. To the point where I literally had a near-death experience.

I literally hovered above myself. And I saw my body lifeless on the hospital bed, with my mother crying out to the doctor to *do something!* And the doctor could not do *anything*. And as much as I was sad for my mother, the truth is that I felt such incredible peace—surrounded by a great glow of gladness—that I honestly did not want to go back. I felt so good, so incredibly *good* that I wanted to stay in that place forever.

But a voice told me I had to come back. [“*Commissioned*” to share the grace of that view from eternity] So I did. And I have lived a good life ever since. But the thing is, I am no longer afraid of suffering. I am no longer afraid of failure. When I sit in silence I can almost—almost—feel what I felt in that moment of pure grace. And because I *know* the grace of God, I am better able to guide you to glimpse that grace yourself.

The glimpse of grace, the glimpse of eternity, revealed to Paul, revealed to my spiritual director, revealed to my husband – who, as many of you know, has also shared a near death experience – and, may I say, revealed also to me: not as a near-death-experience per se but as a journey of “crossing over” – that’s the only way I can describe it – to whatever “over” is, and knowing in those moments nothing other than the steadfast never failing never quitting always faithful LOVE of God that truly is from everlasting to everlasting.

And all I really want to do as your Pastor, with all of my fancy education and my years of experience, is guide you into that mystery, too.

Because that is the true message of the resurrection of Christ: the gift of grace; the view from eternity; revealed to Paul; revealed to my spiritual director; revealed to my husband; revealed even to me; *for you*. So that we may all be made one.

Amen.