

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Learning to Dream Like God

Sunday, April 28, 2019

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Ephesians 3:15–23

Today is the second Sunday of Easter. In case you didn't know, this is an event so big it lasts not just one Sunday, but 50 whole days. We are talking about more than chocolate bunnies and baskets full of plastic grass, after all. We're talking about the redemption of the whole universe.

When I say "redemption," I mean the act of God restoring creation to what it is meant to be, saving it from the power of death, and establishing his reign of righteousness, joy, and peace—not only for humanity, but also for all of the universe. This work was begun in the aftermath of human sin in the Garden of Eden; continued through God's presence in the life of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets; and it found its fullest expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But, it didn't end there. Redemption is now being worked out in the life of the church. If you've ever wondered why the church matters, this is why.

The church was established not upon a philosophy or idea, not through a strategic plan or business model, but in the sudden and definitive vanquishing of the power of death on a Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago. Our purpose as the church, our mission, our charter is to expose this truth, to proclaim this good news—this gospel—that death no longer has power over you or me or any creature God has made. Easter celebrates the beginning of this good news and the investment of the mission of redemption in you and me.

Of course, it's as if there is a great ellipsis (you know, a dot-dot-dot) in the gap between that first Easter celebration and the completion of redemption. The church is the forum within which and through which God's great work of redemption will come to fruition.

Too often we think of the church as an institution, and it does have some institutional expression. But, when you go back to the book of Acts, which tells the story of the beginning of the church, you read not about the founding of an institution, but rather you read about the beginning of a movement of people who were gripped by the good news that the tomb was empty. It tells us the story of how a small group of insignificant, no-name, Jesus followers became a force to be reckoned

with, a force of transformation, a force of hope within the Roman Empire and beyond.

This is exactly how God envisions the church. He is the one who called it into existence, after all. It was his power that opened the tomb, his power that is redeeming you and me, and his power that will see that work through to completion for all creation. So, God sees the church as the eminent force for the unassailable redemptive power of love, mercy, and grace in the world.

One of the best biblical examples of how the church can be this kind of force is in Acts chapter 17. I preached about this in one of my first sermons here at Johns Creek UMC. In that chapter, Paul and Silas had gone to the Greek city of Thessalonica and had preached in the synagogue and in the marketplace as per usual. And you can imagine the sort of things they preached about: all that Jesus stuff like loving your enemies, sharing generously, putting others before yourself, and otherwise living a life that stands against the ways of the world. But in Thessalonica, there were some who benefitted from the ways of the world, from the status quo, and thus were threatened by this message. So, they formed a mob that attacked Paul and Silas's hosts, dragged them before the city council, and declared, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and [this man] has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus" (vv. 6–7).

Turning the world upside down. This is what happens when the power of God gets loose in the world. This is what happens when communities begin to take seriously God's ways of justice, mercy, and life because they come to recognize that Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior, is the true and righteous king: the world gets turned upside down.

Paul turned upside down

The Apostle Paul knew better than anyone about worlds getting turned upside down. Perhaps you know the beginning of his story. Before becoming the prolific evangelist and letter writer for which he became famous,

he had been a Pharisaic Jew who knew without a doubt that Saviors are not crucified and that Jesus of Nazareth born of Mary could not possibly be the Son of God. But his world was turned upside down on the road to Damascus.

He was on his way there because he had received word that some Jesus followers had been disturbing the peace with their messages about justice, mercy, and love, and Paul was intent on putting a stop to it. But the risen Lord got to Paul before Paul got to Damascus and he helped Paul to “change his plans” (shall we say?). What happened was that the Lord appeared to Paul, knocked him to the ground, struck him blind (temporarily), and said (more or less), “Stop persecuting me, bruh.” The Lord confronted Paul with the truth of his gospel. From that day forward, Paul—gripped by the gospel, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, commissioned by the risen Lord—was never the same again. His life was turned upside down.

When people truly encounter the power of God in the risen Christ they are never the same, because the power of God in Jesus Christ is not in the business of this world’s status quo. I mean any power that can take a three-day-old corpse and bring it back to life could hardly be described as predictable!

Paul had figured this out by the time he wrote to the Ephesians. At that point he had spent more than two years with the Ephesian Christians and wrote this letter to them several years after that, near the end of his own life, while in prison in Rome. Word had reached Paul of how the faith of the Ephesians had grown, strengthened, and developed, so he wrote to them with encouragement. He said, “I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”

What we pray for says a lot about where our priorities lie. And what does Paul pray for—this man whose life had been turned upside down by the resurrection, gripped by the hope of redemption? Did he pray for their safety or comfort, that their lives would proceed along a predictable and clearly defined path? No. He prays for God to give the Ephesians “a spirit of wisdom and revelation” as they come “to know” God, “so that” they may *know* “what is the hope to which he has called” them, “what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power.”

Paul knew that in a world being turned upside down by the power of the gospel, God is not looking at us hoping that there will be more of the same. God is looking for something new. And this God who is immeasurably great, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead after first raising Israel out of Egypt, if he can be counted on for anything, it’s to turn the world upside down. So, he says, I pray that God “may give you a

spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that...you may know...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power” (Eph. 1:17–19). Paul knew that knowing the kind of god who is God is paramount. Maybe that’s an important thing for us to consider today.

The most important thing to know

The most important knowledge is knowing the kind of God who is God. I often think about this at this time of year. As a father of two young children, I frequently sit through award ceremonies where one child after another is called up to be recognized for something they have accomplished in school. And I sit through those many hours for the 30 seconds that my own children will be recognized.

Something I am increasingly aware of with every successive year of award ceremonies is that each one moves them closer to adulthood, to careers, to relationships—to whatever futures lay before them. And you’re probably not surprised to hear that these futures weigh heavily in my prayers. I pray for a lot of things for my children: strong and loving mates, success and happiness in their careers, health and wholeness, that they will lead lives that make a difference, that mean something.

Just like every other parent I pray for these things, I long for these things, I yearn for these things. But I don’t *know* that these things will come to pass. I have big dreams, but I don’t *know*. And that’s sobering.

We live in a world obsessed with certainty, and this certainty-obsessed world privileges knowing above nearly all other virtues.

Children spend 13, 17, 20 years or more in environments where they are judged based on what they know, how well they know it, and how well they can prove they know it. Our schools are built around this bias we have that people who know stuff are somehow best equipped to handle life in the real world, which is deeply ironic given that no one really knows what kind of world kids will inhabit when they get out of school, much less whether all that knowing will make any difference.

Now, I’m not anti-education, and I’m certainly not anti-knowing; we just have to recognize its limitations. If you’re a chemist knowing how to calculate molar mass is important. If you’re a teacher knowing how to manage your classroom is crucial. But, in this world, this world that is being renewed, reshaped, turned upside down, and reborn by the redeeming power of the risen Christ, the most important thing our kids can know, the most important thing any of us can know—the thing that must be known more deeply and intimately than anything else that is known—is the sort of god who is God.

What difference does that knowing make? If we're equipped with that knowledge, then we no longer look at the pain and suffering and heartache of this world as a foregone conclusion. We no longer look at the power of death as the ultimate power. We no longer look at redemption as a pipedream. Instead, we come to see redemption as God's dream. We come to see the world that is and the world that will be through God's eyes, through the lens of God's dreams for the world, and we discover our place in that great ellipsis is to be the agents of Easter in a world that thinks it's still Friday. That kind of knowing is not certainty, but it is a knowing far more valuable than anything a school will cultivate.

The biblical narrative of not knowing

I would argue that the church is meant to be the kind of environment that cultivates this most important knowing. The church is meant to be the sort of environment where kids and parents, young and old, people from all backgrounds and walks of life, are learning to live lives of difference and distinctiveness, righteousness, and holy disruptiveness that anticipate the completion of the redemption announced from the empty tomb that first Easter morning. And this is the good news: those of us who know little more than the fact that God's power is immeasurably great can become the sort of changemakers, leaders, and world transformers that God dreams we can be. This has always been the story of God's people, because God's people have tended to be ordinary people who, frankly, didn't know a lot, but who made extraordinary impact because what they did know was the kind of god at work in the world.

God said to Abraham, "Go to a land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Abraham did not receive a GPS and a cell phone with God's number on speed dial. God told him simply, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house."

Where exactly were they going? Would they be safe? How would they find the way? Abraham did not know, and God was comfortable enough with Abraham not knowing the answer to these and countless other questions. God was comfortable with this ambiguity because God knew that Abraham knew what he needed to know: what is the immeasurable greatness of the power of God.

Years later, when Abraham's grandson Jacob was on the run—he had stolen his brother's birthright, hoodwinked his own father, and run off, afraid for his life—he found a place where he *knew* he'd be safe, a place in the middle of nowhere where he could be alone, away from anything that could do him harm or cause his life any more disruption, and he went to sleep.

While he slept, Jacob was confronted with a vision: a ladder ascending into heaven above him and the angels

of the Lord going up and down the ladder. The Lord God spoke to Jacob, saying, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham. . . . Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you will go. . . .; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Jacob had gone to sleep *knowing* he was alone, *knowing* he was free to lead his life as he wished, but when he awoke, Jacob knew the truth. He exclaimed, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it."

Jacob went on to encounter many challenges and struggles. He ended up with the wrong woman for a wife, he was oppressed by his father-in-law, he was waylaid and beaten to a pulp on the shore of the river Jabbok, and he was constantly on the run from his brother Esau. Yet, as these hardships and trials bore the fruit of joy and peace and righteousness, it must have seemed as an echo of God's gentle reminder given in that dream: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

There is no more important thing to know than the kind of god who is God, to know just how present he is, just how powerful are his claims, and just how faithful are his promises.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that what we have in the Bible are these stories that seem bent on teaching us that "faith and certainty are not the same thing, at least not if certainty is a matter of knowing everything you need to know before you leave a familiar place for strange one, or trade in a known way of life for one you do not know. What the stories tell [us] over and over again is that God works with unknowing. God needs people who don't know where they're going and who go anyway" because they know the sort of God who is calling them to go and the sort of future this God is intent on creating.

Conclusion: living faithfully in the ellipsis

The story of the church—at least the one told in the Bible—is the story of people encountering a risen Lord who, even after his ascension, wouldn't stop messing with people's lives, upending a reality that was so comfortable and familiar, and creating something new in its place.

And we see in that story that God works best with those who, for however much they know, are able to go into the world with eyes open to the possibility that God may yet surprise them. God works best with those who hold gently to the truth they know in their heads because they have had inscribed upon their hearts the truth that the One who is the truth has gone before them defying even the power of death.

I believe that it is God's dream for his people, his church, to help others discover precisely this sort of knowledge, to cultivate new generations who are able to dream of a future in which all the loose ends of salvation

are gathered up in Jesus and in which the promise of redemption will be fulfilled in the reign of God.

This is how it all began: a people who knew the tomb was empty, who knew that things had changed, and who knew that God was only just getting started. This is why Paul prayed that the people of Ephesus would grow into this sort of people. My prayer today is for the same thing: that you in this room and even more people in Johns Creek will know “what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurably great power” of this God who will gather up all things in his Son and bring redemption to completion.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Acknowledgements

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Discussion Questions

- Read Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in 1:15–23. What specifically did Paul pray for? Why do you think he prayed for these things? What do you think would happen to the world if such a prayer were fulfilled in us?
- "The most important thing to know is the kind of god who is God." Based on what you see in the Easter story, what kind of god is that?
- In your own words, how would you describe God's vision for the church?
- Where have you experienced and/or seen the power of God turning the world upside down?
- What in your own life is God looking to turn upside down? What in our church? What in our community? What specifically will be different when God accomplishes this transformation?
- In what ways are you obstructing the power of God to accomplish this transformation?