

“To Know Him Better”

**Sermon preached by Carmen Garrigan
Associate Pastor for Youth
Kirkmont Presbyterian Church
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Text: Ephesians 1:15-23
#1 in a series of 10**

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we seek Your presence this morning. All of what we have done here is in vain if we have not encountered the living God. We ask that as Your Word is proclaimed and heard that You would send Your Holy Spirit, so that we would hear Your voice, obey Your call, and glorify You in our life together. It is the cry of our heart to know You more today. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

In our lives there are those occasional moments that sing of the idea “life can’t get better than this.” They may be short and fleeting, but they enable us to drink in the goodness of a particular moment in time that comes to us as a gift from God. Most of my “it can’t get any better than this” moments revolve around the beach. Growing up in Southern California I spent as much time at the beach as I could. I went to surf camp with the YMCA, snorkel camp with the Girl Scouts and learned the basics of being an ocean lifeguard in the city of Encinitas’ Junior Lifeguard program. My favorite feeling every summer was to swim out past the breaking waves and just float. The warmth of the sun, the coolness of the ocean water, and the gentle lull of the incoming waves was the best combination my senses could imagine. Life couldn’t get much better than that I thought.

I often felt the same way in college. I attended Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. I had the terrible misfortune of having a dorm room with an ocean view. Even our cafeteria had a panoramic ocean view. I remembered the many days I would sit on my bed and take in the view as I read theology or studied my Greek flashcards and again thought, “Life can’t get better than this.” For others, their “life can’t get any better than this moments” happen not through experiences or places, but in the company of people they love. I love the feeling at holidays when my whole extended family is together, and I can just enjoy the presence of the people who have cared about me everyday of my life.

While these precious moments are our most treasured memories, the moments are just that- small segments of history that we are blessed to enjoy, but they end as time elapses. Hopefully the best that life has to offer is not just surviving from one treasured memory to the next. Even when life can’t seem to get better, God still offers the fullness of His presence and promise to enjoy tomorrow.

Sometimes your situation is exactly the opposite and life can’t seem to get any worse. Whether it is a constant barrage of family drama, declining health, or a bad financial situation that keeps getting worse, in those times the hope of a new tomorrow

seems too far away. Even then, God still offers the fullness of His presence and promise to give us hope.

In the letter to the Ephesians that we read from this morning, we know from the absence of rebuke from the Apostle Paul, that things were going well for the Ephesians. They were growing as a church, there were no significant heresies to combat and their relationship with Christ was on target. Even with things going as well as they were, the Apostle Paul took time to write and to encourage them to experience something even deeper than they already had. One interpreter of this letter suggests that “Paul wrote to expand the horizons of his readers, so that they might better understand the dimensions of God’s eternal purpose and grace and come to appreciate the high goals God has for the church.”¹ I think that this is a critical message for Kirkmont at this particular time as well.

Before Pastor Eric left for a new call in Kansas City, I think a number of us had that wonderful floating feeling of “church life can’t get any better than this.” I certainly had this thought from time to time. Everything seemed to be going well. We were encountering God’s presence in our midst and many were meeting Christ for the first time or deepening their relationship with the living God. And while there are so many memories to treasure, there will certainly be more memories of that sort to treasure in the future because God’s work among us has just begun. Even though time has continued to elapse and with it significant change, God’s work among us will continue and we have the opportunity to know God better. Even now during a time of transition, God offers us the fullness of His presence and promise to encourage us. Like the church in Ephesus at the time Paul wrote, Kirkmont is at a point where she is a vibrant church that is glorifying God in her many ministries and is in a state of good health. As I speak to many other pastors in the Presbytery they want to know what is in the water over here and they desire to learn from many of the dynamic things that are happening here. This is great, but this is not the end of God’s plan for us. In all that we do, He wants us to know Him better.

This is where our new mission statement and core values come in. It is not that good things weren’t happening without them in place or that we had no direction. All of the core values that we will be talking about over the next nine weeks are things that we are already doing well. The key is that we want to continue to know God better and expand our ministry for His kingdom. By intentionally seeking to absorb this mission statement and these nine core values into our life as a community, we can be purposeful about living out Paul’s prayer for the believers in Ephesus: to know God better, to more fully understand the hope that he has called us to, to begin to fathom the glorious inheritance God has for His people and to experience even more deeply His power that is at work in Church so that we might embody His fullness to an even greater extent.

These goals that Paul prayed for the Ephesians are indeed lofty. They are ones that can be pursued all of our life and we will still have just begun to ascertain their majesty. Therein lies the wonder of this endeavor of being the Church- we can seek to know God better and expand our ministry for His Kingdom, yet just as swimming after the setting sun, the greatness of our task is one that while well started, has just begun.

For the rest of our time together this morning I’d like us to consider these goals Paul prayed for the Ephesians so that we can have just a glimpse of the fullness of blessing we can experience as we, as a congregation, set about the work of embodying the nine core values that you will be hearing about in the next couple of months.

¹ NIV Study Bible, Introduction to the theological message of Ephesians.

The first thing that Paul prayed for the Ephesians in the text we read was that “The glorious Father would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better.” Like so many other biblical truths, writer C.S. Lewis does has a wonderful way of stating this idea of knowing God better as we grow.

In his children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, young heroine Lucy meets a majestic lion named Aslan in the enchanted land of Narnia. Aslan is the great king and the Christ figure through out the whole series. In the second book, *Prince Caspian*, the children make a return visit to Narnia a year after their departure. Upon entering this beloved place, the children discover that everything has changed radically, and they quickly become lost. But after a series of dreadful events, Lucy finally spots Aslan in a forest clearing, rushes to him, throws her arms around his neck, and buries her face in his mane.

The great beast rolls over on his side so that as Lucy fell, she was half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all around her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

"Welcome child," he said.

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That's because you're older, little one," he answered.

"Not because you are?" Lucy responded.

"I'm not. But each year you grow, you'll find me bigger." Aslan wisely and mysteriously replied.

Hasn't that been the case for many of us as well? Every year we grow, we find God bigger in His grace, His goodness, His faithfulness and in those promises that He has given us upon which we can depend all the days of our lives. Even as we age and experience life, we have the opportunity for our knowledge of God to expand in ways that we never dreamed possible.² Let us pray as Paul did, for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to be upon us so that year upon year we can say to God, “You’re bigger than we remembered.”

The second part of Paul’s prayer made the petition that “The eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you...” Many of us gathered here today would affirm that our hope is in Christ, but what does it mean for the eyes of our heart to be opened even more to this reality? The best descriptions of hope come from scripture itself. Romans 5:1-5 records that hope comes through our faith in Christ, is developed through trials, is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and that hope won’t disappoint us.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

² See also Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Harper, 1991), p.31 and R. C. Sproul, "On Narnia Time."

Scripture also reminds us that hope and waiting upon the Lord go hand in hand. For instance, listen to the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 130:5-7: "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption." The prophet Isaiah says, "Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (Isaiah 40:31) While hope can be described by others, it is developed by the personal need to wait on the Lord for what we do not yet possess.

Abraham Lincoln was a man who had to hope in the Lord and wait upon Him for many things. One of the experiences that may have caused him to grieve the most and required waiting for newness of hope to come was the death of his son. It is recorded that Abraham Lincoln went into a severe period of grief in February 1862 when his 11-year-old son, Willie, died.

He found comfort in the words of Presbyterian preacher Reverend Phineas D. Gurley, whose church Lincoln attended but never joined. In the eulogy for Willie, Gurley preached that when tragedy comes, one must look to "him who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well." He also said that when one trusts God, "our sorrows will be sanctified and made a blessing to our souls, and by and by we shall have occasion to say with blended gratitude and rejoicing, 'It is good for us that we have been afflicted.'" Lincoln asked Gurley for the words of the eulogy. They would become his life raft during his intense sorrow.³

The change of seasons points to how we develop hope. It is hard to imagine right now as we are buried in snow and are surrounded by the frozen air of winter that it will all melt and spring will come. Flowers will come up from the earth and trees will break forth into new buds and then leaves. We know that we will have to wait, but still we hope, and we know that we will not be disappointed. Spring will come. Our hope in Christ is like that. We can be sure of His promises even when circumstances do not warrant such a hope. He is at work even when we do not perceive it; like the roots of trees growing even as they hibernate. Christ is sure to come, whether we are prepared for his arrival or not. He is truer and more faithful to us than even seasons in their course.

Hebrews 6:17-20 tells us of the security of our hope: Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10:23)

The third petition of Paul in his prayer for the Ephesians is that they would know the glorious inheritance God has for His people.

"The Mystery of the Missing Owner" read the headline on an unusual section of the Chicago Tribune on Sunday, February 6, 2005. The supplement was actually a legal

³ Joshua Wolf Shenk, "Lincoln's Great Depression," *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2005), p. 66

notice published by the Illinois State Treasurer's Office seeking to give money away to the rightful owners—the contents of abandoned safe deposit boxes, forgotten bank accounts, security deposit checks, uncashed paychecks, and dividend checks.

More than a billion dollars is owed to nearly five million people and businesses that the Treasurer's Office could not trace. The front page of the supplement listed the names and last known addresses of 10 individuals or couples each owed over \$100,000. And what followed were 116 pages packed tightly with names from Lucilee Aakeberg to Leonard E. Zyzda—113,000 names of people all owed more than \$100 in cash and/or stock!

It seems like such a shame that people could be unaware of their rightful treasures. Yet that is precisely the condition of many Christians who live without taking advantage of God's promises of peace, strength, comfort, wisdom, love and many other spiritual treasures to which all the heirs of God are entitled.

Are you aware of all the treasures God is holding in trust for you to claim?

The final thing that Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus was that we would know God's incomparably great power for us who believe. This is the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at the Father's right hand, giving him authority over everything that is and that is to come, and over church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.

This power that raised Christ from the dead is hard for us to fathom, let alone make use of. Many believers may not even know that this power is available to them. One high school teacher and baseball coach had unique strength that he was unaware of but was curious enough to try it out.

The movie *The Rookie* is based on the true story of Jimmy Morris, a high school teacher and baseball coach who became a major-league baseball pitcher. Several of the high school players who had been on the receiving end of Morris's fastballs encouraged him to try out for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. Because of his age and past injuries, Morris dismissed their encouragement as wishful thinking. Morris knew the major-league scouts would not consider a prospect unless he could throw 90 miles-per-hour.

Inwardly, however, Morris can't shake his curiosity. While driving his pickup down a deserted country highway one night, Morris spots a sign that displays the speed of oncoming traffic. Morris slows his truck and pulls to the side of the road. Looking to see if anyone is watching, Morris grabs a baseball, walks into the road, and tosses the ball past the sign. The number 46 quickly flashes on the sign. It works.

Morris smiles and walks swiftly back to the truck to grab an old baseball glove and another baseball. A car drives down the highway and Morris quickly turns and leans nonchalantly against his truck. He walks back on to the road and takes one more look to see if any cars are coming. Then he winds up and throws the ball with everything he has. The sign stares blankly back at him for a moment, and then it flashes 76.

Discouragement falls over Morris's face. He walks slowly to retrieve the baseballs. What Morris does not see is the sign blinking for a moment and the 7 becoming a 9. Morris has actually thrown a fastball at 96 miles-per-hour! Yet he remains

unaware of his own strength until he is convinced by his students to go to a minor league tryout day.⁴

Many Christians and many churches are also unaware of the power that is theirs through Christ. I love the story of one pastor and one church that learned to tap into God's power through prayer- the story of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church in Brooklyn New York. Pastor Jim Cymbala started serving as the pastor of two very small churches without any formal training at a Bible College or seminary- one in Newark New Jersey and the other in Brooklyn New York. The offerings were so meager, he received a salary of \$3,800 at a time when the national average income for a household the size of his was \$14,000. The churches were in poor, drug addicted, gang ridden and every other problem possible kinds of neighborhoods. His wife also enjoyed leading choirs, even though she had no formal training either. They labored at both churches for a while until eventually they knew they could not keep up the pace of serving two places. As they sought God about the matter they both felt led to keep serving the Brooklyn church even though the one in Newark was paying his salary. And so they committed to that course of action.

The Cymbalas' hearts were broken by the broken lives that filled the neighborhoods adjacent to the church. The problems seemed hopeless and Jim's body was taking a toll from the stress. On the edge of despair, Pastor Cymbala told the Lord that he would rather die than merely tread water throughout his ministry career, preaching about the power of the Word and Spirit, but never seeing it. He abhorred the thought of just having church services and hungered for God to break through in his family's life and in the ministry of the church. In one of his prayers of desperation, he heard God speak to his heart. The Lord's direction was clear. He and his wife were to lead the people in prayer and in calling upon God. God would supply their needs financially and spiritually and they wouldn't ever have a building large enough to contain the crowds that God would send. While things didn't immediately turnaround completely, Jim Cymbala had renewed assurance and strength to follow God's leading.

And so their Tuesday evening prayer meetings began. Pastor Cymbala declared that the weekday prayer meetings of the church would be the gauge from which they would determine the health of the church. All were invited to come. These prayer meetings began with 16 or so folks eager to meet with God and grew from there. Sometimes they called out to God in corporate prayer, sometimes in gathered silence, sometimes they called out to God on behalf of the pressing needs of those whom had come. But something was certain- a fresh fire and fresh wind had come upon them. The choir began to grow as did the congregation and the transformations that were happening in people's lives. God's words continued to come true as buildings were bought and renovated. One of America's meanest neighborhoods was overcome by the healing power of Christ and a large choir of untrained voices and instrumentalists recorded Grammy Award winning records. Such things could only be accomplished through the mighty power of God.

⁴ Elapsed time: Measured from the beginning of the opening credit, this scene begins at 34:52 and ends at 37:47. The Rookie is rated G.

One Sunday while I was attending seminary in Princeton I took a day to visit a number of the churches I had heard so much about in New York. In the morning I went to two well-known Presbyterian churches in Manhattan and in the afternoon I went over to Brooklyn to attend an evening service. The Brooklyn Tabernacle is the only church that I have ever had to wait in line in order to be able to have a space in the sanctuary during the service. The place was packed to the brim and everyone was filled with a genuine anticipation for what God would do in their midst and had a hunger for God's power to be at work in the lives of the individuals who had gathered to call upon God in prayer and worship. There is an incredible story of learning about God's redeeming power firsthand and letting this incredible force loose in their lives, in their church, and in their neighborhood.

If we rely on God's power at work in our midst, Christ's fullness will pervade our body so that we might resemble His nature and carry out His work to an even greater degree. This is the outcome Paul prays for the Ephesian church. In taking fun pictures at tourist locations have you had the occasion to put your face above a headless frame painted to represent a muscle man, a clown, or even a bathing beauty? Many of us have had our pictures taken this way, and the photos are humorous because the head doesn't fit the body. If we could picture Christ as the head of our local body of believers, would the world laugh at the misfit? Or would they stand in awe of a human body so closely related to her divine head?⁵ This too is an important question to ask ourselves as we seek to have Christ's fullness fill us in every way.

As we embark upon this journey of seeking to know God better as we incorporate the core values that you have before you into our lives both individually and as a congregation, my prayer for us is the same as Paul prayed for the Ephesians: that we would grow to know God better in all the ways he described.

Would you join with me now in prayer as seek God together? I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

⁵ Dan Bernard. Bryan, Texas. Leadership, Vol. 5, no. 1