

Growing Up in Jesus series ~ A Study of Ephesians

Wk 6: A Mountain Under Our Feet

(Drawing from Eugene Peterson's writing on the New Testament & his book *Practice Resurrection*)

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - April 25, 2021

I want to begin this morning with some of the context of the New Testament in which we have the Letter to the Ephesian Church. We have these books and letters of the New Testament, because something changed in the world because of Jesus. For those that knew the resurrected Jesus there was a new amazement because they could see they were living in a world where God called all the shots – God had the first word on everything and the last word on everything. This meant that as they looked around, everything in their lives had to be re-centered, re-imagined, and re-thought around Jesus. **“God became flesh and moved into the neighborhood,”** as John 1 says it, and this was good news.

Then the first believers started telling this God-story with gusto. They told stories about Jesus ministry and travels and arranged the teaching in the gospel form of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They also wrote letters. They sang songs. They prayed. And one of the first followers wrote Revelation based on holy visions that showed that *Jesus wins!*

With these gospels and letters, the early Christians lives were being changed and shaped by what they were reading and soon they arrived at the conviction that God's Holy Spirit had guided the authors of the New Testament.

Looking back they could see that the collection was not random, not haphazard: they could see that every document worked in harmony.

The first believers were bold to call what had been written “God’s Word,” and they trusted their lives to it. They accepted its authority in their lives. And this is God’s Word for us and it is authoritative in our lives today. Ephesians is one of these New Testament books.

Now get this, the New Testament was written in the street language of the day, the slang of the playground, the terms of the marketplace. In the Greek-speaking world of that day, there were two levels of language: formal and informal. Formal language was used to write philosophy and history, government decrees and poetry. If someone were to sit down and consciously write for posterity, they would have written in this formal language with its educated vocabulary and precise wording.

But informal Greek was for routine shopping lists, family letters, bills, and receipts. That was how most people wrote and that is the language the New Testament was written in. You might be taken aback by that, supposing a holy writing about God and holy things would be in elevated and stately language. But then consider Jesus and who he hung out with. He hung out with the down-to-earth sorts, common people, so then it does make sense that the New Testament was written in the language they used.

Jesus, after all, is God's descent to our lives just as we are, not the ascent of our lives to God. I think sometimes people get that mixed up. We think we have to be elevated and stately, we have to be good enough to encounter God, forgetting that we've been made good enough by faith in Jesus. The common language of the New Testament then is consistent with Jesus' descent to us. The earthly language catches us where we are when God may be the furthest thing from our minds.

Most people throughout history have believed in the existence of God or gods. That wasn't the new news of the New Testament. But the Gospel message that God is here right now, that God is on our side, seeking to help us in the ways we most need help – that was new news!

Before Jesus lived and spoke and died and rose again, there was still a lot of anxiety about God. *Where is He? What is He like? Can God be trusted?* Now there is no need for guessing about God, God is good and passionate to save us. That is the wonderful news I think we need to keep in mind. Jesus says God is not out to get us or out for payback for the wrongs we have done. God, shown to us by Jesus, spoken of by Jesus, is out to save us and bring us back home. This is wonderful news we need to remind ourselves about.

But on what authority does Jesus say this wonderful news? Consider that throughout the Gospels when Jesus speaks a word... *it happens!* Forgiveness happens,

healing happens, understanding happens, mercy and grace happen, joy and love happen, freedom and resurrection. Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased, called into the salvation story by Jesus gets healed. Jesus is God's word become flesh and as we know from Genesis 1: *God speaks and it happens*. This truly is good news. Jesus speaks on the basis of His own authority. He speaks and it happens. That is why, given the performative power of Jesus' Word, when Ephesians 1:10 says, He will **"...gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth..."**. We have hope that will happen, because God's Word said it.

Now today Jesus makes our daily lives holy. Jesus has been weaving His salvation story into our lives through daily life conversations, meals with friends, daily concerns, and random prayers. Just like He always has been in the lives of His people.

And because the story of Jesus is so impressive, because it is so amazing that *God is among us!* God is here to save us! God speaks a language we can understand! God inviting us into His Kingdom by faith! God offering us dignity by enjoying conversation with us! God acting in ways that heal and help and save us! – because that story is so impressive, there is then a danger that we will be impressed, but only be impressed. We could read the Bible and say, *"Wow, a lot happened"*, close the book and be on our way.

As we read the stories in the Bible, we can become spectators, spectators and then let it go at that – become admirers of Jesus, in our better moments inspired to imitate Him, at times offer our “oos” and “ahs” at His brilliance and miracles.

But when you consider that God does not work apart from forgiven, flawed, highly talented, yet highly ordinary people, then we who are impressed spectators can get on to hope, because He is already doing His good work in our lives. Already started and promising to complete every good work. The hope is that this, our down to earth livelihood, is where God IS growing us to maturity in Christ. He’s already at work. And that maturity necessarily happens with others He is also maturing. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, were some of the first, Rosemary, Greg, Scott, Joan, and Phil, are some today. No one gets excluded, you’ve all been picked for Jesus’ story.

When we respond to Jesus it is the beginning of a new community. We become fellow-travelers following Jesus, all different and all one. Every person different, yet every person united to Jesus our Head.

The story of Jesus doesn’t end at the Resurrection by the way. It’s remarkable that it continues today in us. The New Testament authors make it clear that we are in on the action of God, God is acting in us, God is living in us by His Holy Spirit. If you ever doubt whether God is on your

side in this difficult world, remember that His Holy Spirit is in you. He's not going to work against Himself. Jesus' name means "*Yahweh to the rescue.*" The amazing story of the Gospel is that "*God is here and He's on our side!*" freeing us from fear of sin, disease, failure, and death. He's blessing us with freedom from fear.

Paul began his letter to the Ephesians with a long blessing: he blesses God for blessing us. How often do we thank God for the blessing He has given to others? Paul uses seven verbs of God's doing that provide the breadth of ways God works in the cosmos. No longer lost in the cosmos, we are part of God's plan. God is on our side; He is not against us. God is present and personal working for our good and our salvation. God is totally involved in the cosmos and God is seeking us. We start with the blessing. We continue with thanks. **"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."**

Thank you for being part of this part of God's story. Thank you for following Jesus. You know there have been Christians following Jesus, enjoying God, here at First Presbyterian Church for almost 150 years. Next year we'll celebrate that and if we could talk to some of the folk that established our church and those that have continued our church before us, I'd bet they'd say to us, "*I have not stopped giving thanks for you.*" Jesus' story continues in us His Body.