

Sermon, January 3, 20120

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome Debi and Sean Beachy, our music directors, who are providing special music. Hopefully, before too long, we can worship in person again. Meanwhile, if you would like to help support our ministries and benevolence commitments, you can donate through our web page or Facebook page. Now today's stupid joke.

A pastor friend of mine is finishing her first Advent- Christmas season in a new call today. I asked how it is going, and she said, "You know how in most congregations, half of the people do all the work and the other half hardly do anything?" And I said, "I sure do." And she said, "It's funny, but in this congregation, the reverse is true." (Huh?)

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, you have filled us with the new light of the Word who became flesh and lived among us. Let the light of our faith shine in all that we do; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever, Amen.

A Reading from Ephesians, the first chapter.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the

good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the first chapter.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the

light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

The French term is déjà vu. It literally means "already seen." In English we call it paramnesia. It is that weird psychological phenomenon that makes you feel like something brand new that's happening has somehow happened before. They say 70% of human beings experience paramnesia at least once in their lives. I know I just did, because I swear I have read the John the Baptist story before, and it seems quite recently. O wait, I guess I have. In fact, three times, in just the last five weeks.

Because John is featured in the gospel readings every second and third Sunday of Advent and then he makes an encore appearance here on the second Sunday of Christmas.

Next week is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, which we celebrate as the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. Wanna guess who's doing the Baptizing?

So sorry John, but if you don't mind, I might just talk about something else. We could play Bible trivia. I know I have asked you before, "What's the shortest verse of the Bible?" And some of you knew it right away, saying, "Jesus wept." But that is actually a trick question based on a bad translation.

Because in John chapter 11 verse 35 the Greek verb $\delta\alpha\kappa\rho\upsilon\omega$ meaning "weep" is written in the form of an ingressive or inchoative aorist, meant to highlight the onset of an action rather than the action itself. (Pay attention—this WILL be on the test!)

So a better translation would probably be the way the NRSV renders it, "Jesus began to weep," or more dramatically, "Jesus burst into tears." Which is nowhere near the shortest verse of the Bible.

Some think the shortest verse is Job 3 verse 2 which is often translated as "Job said." But it is actually three words in Hebrew, which literally mean something like, "Job answered, saying..." so that's not it either. Give up? The real shortest verse of the bible is first Thessalonians 5:16.

$\text{P}\alpha\text{ / n}\text{t}\text{o}\text{t}\text{e}\ \text{x}\alpha\text{i}\rho\epsilon\text{t}\text{e}$ is how it reads in Greek, meaning "Always. Rejoice." Or "Rejoice. Always."

Do you know the longest sentence in the Bible? Actually today, you do—it is our second reading from the book of Ephesians. Most translators cut it up into several sentences to make it easier to

follow, but in the original Greek Ephesians 1: 3-14 is all one long sentence. And it is not only the longest sentence in the Bible, it may be the longest sentence in all of Greek literature.

But it is NOT just some big old ugly run-on. It is in fact a carefully-crafted highly-complex complete thought, consisting of numerous independent and dependent clauses skillfully woven together in a way that would truly be appreciated by any dedicated grammarian. Which, as my last sentence clearly betrays, I am not.

Ephesians has six chapters containing more than one hundred fifty verses, and we're scheduled to read more than half of them in the year ahead, so I figure a little background now couldn't hurt.

Language scholars say Ephesians and First Peter are by far the New Testament's most skillfully written works. Unfortunately neither is probably anybody's favorite book of the Bible, at least these days.

Both were clearly written for their own situations and circumstances, and they don't cross the barriers of time and culture very well. Some of their passages were in fact used to defend slavery in the Antebellum American South as well as to justify centuries of the oppression of women, both in the Church and in society at-large.

But biblical scholars suggest there are a few things we should consider before passing judgment on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, pointing to three things they say Paul's letter to the Ephesians is probably NOT.

First, they say it is probably NOT a letter, even though that's what your Bible may call it. In fact none of the biblical Epistles are really letters in the modern sense of the word. Paul's Epistles weren't the sort of correspondence folks would stuff into their

Christmas cards. He wasn't writing to bring folks up to speed on how Timothy was getting along in college or to tell folks all about the baby's first steps. In other words, Paul's Epistles were NOT the sorts of writings meant to be posted on the refrigerator with magnets.

Paul's Epistles were really persuasive speech manuscripts, or more accurately sermon texts, intended to be read aloud or preached to gathered assemblies of believers in the local house churches of early Christianity.

Literacy rates were low in the first century Biblical world, and since few of the early Christians were among society's privileged, probably not many early church-goers could have read Paul's Epistles anyway, even if they wanted to.

Paul's sermons normally addressed specific problems, disputes, divisions and questions with which particular congregations were wrestling.

Which brings me to the second thing that Paul's letter to the Ephesians probably was not—it probably WAS NOT written to the Ephesians. It doesn't mention any specific issues or difficulties they may have had. And the earliest manuscripts do not identify the intended recipients or ANY church community.

Scholars say the words "to the saints who are in Ephesus" from verse one were added sometime in the late second century. Most think what we call Ephesians was actually a sermon intended for broader appeal, probably meant to be an encyclical of sorts, circulated among the various churches of Asia Minor.

The third thing scholars insist Paul's letter to the Ephesians probably is NOT, is that it probably is NOT really from Paul. Paul's undisputed writings lack long complex sentences like that

one we just read. Paul's sentences were more like his talking points-- simple and straightforward. The fairly short epistle to the Ephesians has nine different sentences over fifty words long. Paul didn't write like that in any of his other sermons.

Ephesians also uses many words not found in the undisputed Pauline Epistles, and many of the concepts common to Paul's writings are given completely different meanings here. In other sermons Paul says we Christians, "Will be saved." Ephesians says we already are.

Elsewhere Paul anticipated the imminent end times. Ephesians instead prepares its readers for the fact that that might not happen any time soon. Elsewhere Paul speaks of equality among men and women, slaves and their owners.

But in its so-called "haustafeln" or "household codes," Ephesians lays out a complex hierarchy for both Church and family with men at the top. Ephesians supports marriage with husbands in charge. Paul's other epistles generally do not favor marriage at all.

And while elsewhere Paul says that in Christ we are no longer male or female, slave or free. The author of Ephesians indicates, "Oh yes we are. So know your place and stay in it."

And now you know that Paul's letter to the Ephesians probably wasn't—a letter. From Paul. To the Ephesians. So maybe we should mention a few things that Paul's letter to the Ephesians definitely was.

Ephesians was written to the third generation of Christians, probably from someone in the second. It was a passing of the baton of sorts, a handing off of the faith born of Paul's generation to its grandchildren. The church had changed over those many years, as had its faith understanding.

By this time Christians were mostly gentiles, who didn't really know how to get along with or relate to the remaining Jews among them. Many credit (or in some cases blame) Ephesians for institutionalizing the church, teaching that regardless of what we look like or where we comes from, we are united as Christ's body with One Lord, One Faith, and One baptism. It presents ours as a faith designed to sustain us over the long haul rather than just carry us over until tomorrow or the next day when Jesus is expected back.

I especially appreciate the Ephesians notion that Christ was not just the Jesus of the past or the Jesus yet to come. Christ is also the Jesus of the here and now, who is with us daily to support us, forgive our trespasses and deliver to us our rightful inheritance as God's own people.

Ephesians speaks of heavenly places accessible to us now. Assuring us we can experience Christ not just at the end of our lives, or even at that long-elusive end of the age.

And I don't know about you, but I like the kind of Jesus who knows where we are and what we are going through, and can get us through the tough days when we feel sad and lost. You know--the same sort of Jesus who many years ago "began to weep;" or even "burst into tears" when his friends were struggling.

Ephesians invites us as a community of faith to rise from the dead and let Christ shine upon us. And while I'm not nuts about all the gender bias and pro-slavery stuff, I certainly can relate to its notion that we are ONE in this Church, regardless of what we look like or where we come from.

Which I guess is why the real Paul's shortest verse of the Bible really didn't need any more words. Salvation is offered to all of

us, through our Lord Jesus Christ. So let us

Pa / ntote xai zrete. Rejoice. Always.

Amen.
