



Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday of Christmas

Date: January 4, 2008

Sermon Title: Extraordinary Blessing, Strength, Faithfulness

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I have long been fascinated by the passion and the faithfulness of the early church. The first generation or two of Christians lived with a tremendous commitment to Christ, and with a true zeal to share their faith with others who didn't know anything about Christian faith. Many of them didn't start out that way. For instance: the eleven remaining disciples spent much of their time in hiding between Good Friday and the Day of Pentecost. They were mostly absent when Jesus died on the cross, and the Holy Spirit found them hiding in an upper room – safely locked away from the *powers that be*. But eventually, the Spirit took hold of their hearts and turned them around. They grew in their dedication to Christ, and their desire to live faithfully in a society where Christians were harshly persecuted because of their faith. They began to speak out publicly about their faith, even when it was not safe to do so. Most of the early leaders of the church met their death as the ruling powers sought to suppress their message. In those very challenging times – in those very dangerous times – the church truly thrived. The more oppressive the government became, the more important the church and the faith became, for those who believed.

The question for our day, of course, is how we might experience some of that same passion for the faith. How could we begin to know a faith that is as vital for us as it was for those who were part of the early church?

We could pray for hard times to come, of course. And the truth is: when the going gets tough, Christian faith often does very well. We Lutherans remember the not-so-distant past, when Germany was divided between east and west. In East Germany, the setting for much of our Lutheran history, those who were baptized actually lost certain civil rights because they became Christians. The church was smaller in those days, as you can imagine. But it was strong and faithful, and it was in the churches that the movement to overthrow the communist regime and tear down the Berlin wall took root and grew. I suppose we could pray that our government would become as aggressively opposed to the Gospel as was the case in East Germany, and that probably would work for some of us.

But there is a different way – a better way – and that way is has to do with this morning's first lesson. It is a reading from the opening paragraphs of Ephesians. We don't know a great deal about this letter. It may be an actual letter written by the Apostle Paul. Or it may have been written by one of his close associates, or someone who later wanted to honor him by writing in a way that reflected the church's understanding of what Paul believed and taught. We can't make any definitive statements about its authorship. But we do know that this letter came out of the early church, was embraced by the leaders of the early church, and surely reflects the faith of many believers in that time.

In studying this passage, the immediate experience of most readers is to be aware of the extraordinary ways in which God has blessed those who believe. These verses are literally gushing about what God has done.

- Verse three states that God had blessed them.
- Verse four states that even before the foundation of the world, God chose them.
- Verse five states that God had destined

FIRST LESSON

JEREMIAH 31:7-14

OR SIRACH 24:1-12

PSALM

PSALM 147:12-20

OR

WISDOM OF SOLOMON

10:15-21

SECOND LESSON

EPHESIANS 1:3-14

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 1: [1-9] 10-18

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
HAVE FILLED ALL THE EARTH
WITH THE LIGHT OF YOUR
INCARNATE WORD. BY
YOUR GRACE EMPOWER US
TO REFLECT YOUR LIGHT IN
ALL THAT WE DO,
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST,
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS
WITH YOU AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND
FOREVER. AMEN.**

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God's work. Our hands.

them for adoption as children of faith.

- Verse nine refers to how the mystery of God's will was made known to them.
- In verse eleven, God gives them an inheritance, and again in that verse declares that they are destined for a purpose.
- In verse thirteen, God marked them with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

The scope of this opening section is remarkable. In Ephesians we see how richly blessed the early church believed themselves to be. God had come into their lives, and affected them in a remarkable way. It is almost overwhelming.

But as this letter makes clear, if they had been extraordinarily blessed, they were extraordinarily strengthened through that blessing.

- God blessed them, leaving them with every spiritual blessing that they could ever need.
- God chose them in order that they might be holy and blameless – completely forgiven by the grace that they knew in Jesus Christ.
- God destined them for adoption as children of faith so that they might be recipients of grace; redeemed by the blood of Christ; forgiven by the grace of God.
- They were informed about the mystery of God's will so that they might be gathered up with all things.
- God gave them an inheritance so that they might live with hope and love for God.
- They were marked by the Holy Spirit so that they could have confidence in the inheritance that was theirs through Christ.

In every instance, these extraordinary blessings touched their hearts and lives, and gave them extraordinary strength.

But again, it doesn't end there, because strengthened by God, these Ephesians realized that they were called to lives of extraordinary faithfulness. Ephesians describes the kind of life that flows from this sort of blessing – from this sort of strengthening – as a life that lives for the praise of God's glory. That phrase might be a bit hard to understand. It is easier, perhaps, to think of those individual disciples who healed the sick, who fed the hungry, who comforted the brokenhearted, and who shared the good news of Christ in word and in deed. Their names are scattered throughout the New Testament – and are familiar to anyone who has attended a worship service on the various saints' days throughout our church year: St. Paul, St. Peter, St. James, St. John and the many others.

What is the difference between the early church and the church of our day? Maybe it has to do with how many people in the early church were aware of God's extraordinary blessing. A blessing that gave them extraordinary strength, and empowered them for extraordinary faithfulness.

I've had some glimpses of that this past month at Saint Peter, and it's been a real blessing to me. Most of you know that this coming Tuesday is a festival in our church calendar: The Epiphany of Our Lord. On that day, the church makes the transition from Christmas to Epiphany by remembering the wise men who traveled from the east to bring their gifts to the Newborn King. We'll have a special evening worship service on that day at Saint Peter, and during worship those of us who received money on November 16th, and who invested that money to try and grow it for God, will have an opportunity to bring our own gifts and present them to Christ.

It's been fun, these past seven weeks, to see the creative and enthusiastic way so many people have chosen to participate in this project. I've heard people talking with one another about what to do, offering suggestions to each other as to how to strengthen their approach, spreading the word about what goods and services are now available for sale. In many ways, it has been a chance to live out what is described in this morning's lesson from Ephesians. We were blessed to have these cash gifts entrusted to us. \$10,000 in all for our congregation! We were strengthened by one another's support and encouragement along the way. And we have become involved in what I hope will be an extraordinary ministry of reaching across the ocean and offering our support to the men and women who are healing bodies and souls at Selian Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania. I hope you'll all be with us this Tuesday as we hear some first-hand stories about what has taken place, and celebrate both our love for God and our appreciation of the ministries at Selian.

But more importantly, I hope this project can be one that gives us a glimpse of the vibrancy and excitement that was part of the early church – the faithfulness and determination of that early disciple community. They truly felt blessed by God. And because of that, they put whatever strength and ability they had to work for God’s purposes. This is the spirit that gave birth to the letter we call Ephesians today. This is the spirit that turned the early church into a growing and thriving community of faith. This is the spirit that can be the strength and the heart of our life together today. As we realize how extraordinary God’s blessings have been in our lives, we too will become strengthened in extraordinary ways, and become involved in extraordinary ministries

God has great hope for us as a people of faith. And God lovingly and willingly gives us the strength and ability to pursue those hopes. I pray that the encouragement of the letter to the Ephesians will stir us to faithfulness, and that through us, the world might see the presence of God in our world.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 4, 2009)

Epistle Lesson (English Text) ⁱ

^{1,3} 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, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ 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, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ 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; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory. ⁱⁱ

Epistle Lesson (Greek Text):

^{1,3} Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ εὐλογήσας ἡμᾶς ἐν πάσῃ εὐλογία πνευματικῇ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις ἐν Χριστῷ, ⁴ καθὼς ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ, ⁵ προορίσας ἡμᾶς εἰς υἰοθεσίαν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς αὐτόν, κατὰ τὴν εὐδοκίαν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ, ⁶ εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ ἧς ἐχαρίτωσεν ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ ἡγαπημένῳ. ⁷ Ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν παραπτωμάτων, κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ ⁸ ἧς ἐπερίσσευσεν εἰς ἡμᾶς, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ φρονήσει, ⁹ γνωρίσας ἡμῖν τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ, κατὰ τὴν εὐδοκίαν αὐτοῦ ἣν προέθετο ἐν αὐτῷ ¹⁰ εἰς οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν, ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἐπὶ τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐν αὐτῷ. ¹¹ Ἐν ᾧ καὶ ἐκληρώθημεν προορισθέντες κατὰ πρόθεσιν τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐνεργούντος κατὰ τὴν βουλὴν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ ¹² εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἡμᾶς εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης αὐτοῦ τοὺς προηλπικότας ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ. ¹³ Ἐν ᾧ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀκούσαντες τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς σωτηρίας ὑμῶν, ἐν ᾧ καὶ πιστεύσαντες ἐσφραγίσθητε τῷ πνεύματι τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τῷ ἁγίῳ, ¹⁴ ὃ ἐστὶν ἄρραβὼν τῆς κληρονομίας ἡμῶν, εἰς ἀπολύτρωσιν τῆς περιποιήσεως, εἰς ἔπαινον τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/worship/church_year.

ⁱⁱ Ephesians 1:3-14, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ephesians 1:3-14, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren,

Gospel Lesson (English Text)

^{1.1} In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.)

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ (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.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ 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. ^{iv}

Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

^{1.1} Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

⁶ Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης. ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον.)

¹⁰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹² ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³ οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν.

¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ¹⁵ Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων· οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον· ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθεν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτος μου ἦν. ¹⁶ ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος. ¹⁷ ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο. ¹⁸ Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο. ^v

Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

iv St. John 1:(1-9) 10-18, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

v St. John 1:(1-9) 10-18, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).