

Text: Ephesians 3:1-13
Title: The Mystery of Christ
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For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON
By: Rev. Amanda C. Bakale

What about the gospel captures your imagination?

Not just what you know to be true, but a way of framing the gospel that makes your heart sing, that resonates with the deepest part of you, or just knocks you off your feet?

For me, I was knocked off my feet by a phrase used by Francis Spufford as a shorthand for the fullness of the gospel. Francis is a British writer and he came back to faith in Jesus in his 30s. And he committed himself to wrestle with just what it means to belong to Jesus and what it means for the world, and why would any thinking modern person believe in all this stuff.

And what he settled on, how he gave expression to the gospel that captured his skeptical imagination, was that at the root of the gospel is the deep assurance and hope that in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, “far more can be mended than we know.”

Far more can be mended than we know.

And that way of framing the gospel took root in my soul and gave me language for something deeply true about what it means to follow Jesus. To trust that despite all evidence to the contrary sometimes, because of Jesus, far more in our world, our lives, our own brokenness, can be mended than we can possibly know.

Here in Ephesians, Paul writes a letter about a way of explaining the gospel that so captured his imagination, that reoriented his whole life, that he went to prison for proclaiming it.

Which is where he is when he writes this letter. Paul is alone and helpless in a dark and dank prison in Ephesus. And from those conditions, Paul writes this letter filled with light and hope and wonder at just what God in Jesus is up to in the world and in the church Paul loves.

Just like the rest of Scripture, Paul uses different images and metaphors to explain and unpack the good news this is ours in Jesus. At the beginning of his letter, in Chapter 1, Paul rushes through a whole bunch: the gospel as adoption, the gospel as forgiveness of sins, the gospel as predestined salvation, and ending on the one way of framing the gospel that will dominate the rest of his letter and especially our portion of it this morning:

The gospel as the mystery of Christ.

We don't often think of the gospel as a mystery. We're more inclined to think of the gospel as a set of propositions to believe or just the simple good news that Jesus died for our sins. Gospel as mystery? Not really. But here in our passage this morning, Paul is all about the mystery of Christ:

How the mystery was "made known to [him] by revelation" (v. 3).

About his "insight into the mystery of Christ, which has not been made known to people in other generations" (v. 5).

And how his role is to "make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God" (v. 9).

And for Paul, this mystery is made known in the unlooked for and un hoped for inclusion of Gentiles, now together with Israel, into the family of God, into full sharing of all God's covenant promises.

In Jesus, God brings together in unity those who belonged and those who did not.

Those who knew God intimately and those who were far off.

And in the mystery of Jesus, God draws them together before him - bringing unity where there was only division before.

This act of God - this drawing in and bringing together in Jesus - this, according to Paul, isn't just about Jew and Gentile, but for the whole world. This is what God is doing in and through the mystery of Christ for all created things in heaven and on earth. Paul lays this out in Chapter 1:

With all wisdom and understanding, God made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (v.9-10).

For Paul the mystery of Christ has captured his imagination, his heart, and his life. The mystery of Christ is his whole life's work. The vision of the gospel has so changed him that he can speak of light and hope in this mystery from the darkest prison cell.

And for Paul, who formerly hunted down Christ followers for trial and imprisonment, who saw them as a dangerous subversion of the Jewish faith and a cult to be stamped out, this gospel of grace he now proclaims is not something he could have dreamt up or imagined on his own, only God.

Now this former oppressor of Christ followers is captured by the mystery of Christ - that in Jesus, God is bringing unity to all things in heaven and on earth. Even to the biggest division he knew - to Jew and Gentile.

How incredibly hard it can be to have the imagination, the faith, to see the world this way.

How hard to imagine, to believe, that our divisions can be bridged, that the broken things in our lives and the world around us can be mended, and that God could ever possibly bring all things together in Jesus Christ. Some days I simply don't have enough imagination for it.

Especially in a week like this one.

The violent images we've seen this week coming out of Washington D.C., the result of vicious rhetoric and lies that corroded the imagination and hearts of so many, that warped reality enough for some that they took up arms and stormed the Capitol building.

As an American I am rocked by this - but unfortunately, not surprised, given the deep dysfunction of my country of my birth.

As a Christian, I have been even more deeply troubled by the images of crosses being carried along with AR-15s. Of “Jesus Saves” banners alongside banners of the president of the United States dressed like Rambo.

How can these divisions possibly be bridged?

These lies are too big to undo.

The violence too engrained to be overcome.

The brokenness of it all seems too far gone to be mended.

And the witness of the church too damaged to be healed.

A week ago, Rev. Margaret Kibben was sworn in as the chaplain for the House of Representatives in Washington D.C. Wednesday was her third day on the job. She opened the House session with prayer and then found her seat - knowing it would be a long day but having no clue what would unfold.

As chaos reached the House chambers and the evacuation began, Rev. Kibben found herself with a group of lawmakers - Republicans and Democrats - sequestered away in some room of the Capitol building unsure if they'd be found and what would happen if they were. And in that tension, in that fear, in that uncertainty, someone turned to her and asked her to pray.

Pastor Margaret turned to Scripture - to Psalm 46 - and read about God as our refuge and shelter, that we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. And then she prayed. She prayed for those sheltered in place. For a covering of peace and protection. But not just for those with her. She also prayed for those ransacking the Capitol around them. That they might come to understand the harm they were doing and to understand the common ground they held with each other. Between those breaking windows and those huddled behind closed doors.

Since Wednesday, Rev. Kibben has been at work. Back in the Capitol building. Listening to and praying with lawmakers and staff, janitors and Capitol police officers.

As a follower of Jesus, she speaks words of hope into their deep disagreements, speaks words of comfort into their great fear, and bears witness to the beautiful mystery of Christ

that, even in the midst of violence and division, God remains at work to mend what is broken, heal what is harmed, and bring together what is divided.

As she reflected on Wednesday and the work that is before her, Rev. Kibben said:

Our daily lives are not separate from God's involvement in them. God is very much present and very much has come alongside each and everyone of us as we labour in the vineyard. and if that labour is tedious, God understands the tedium. If the labour is under siege, God understand the crisis and walks beside us in still waters, as well as in the shadows of danger. Faith matters. It mattered on Wednesday. It matters today. And it'll matter tomorrow.

Paul reminds us that it is God's intent that the church reveals the manifold wisdom of God. Not because we're especially great at this grace stuff, not because we're exceptional at our task of being stewards of this grace - in fact we too often become gate-keepers who deepen the divide.

But because when we gather in Jesus' name, in the presence of the Spirit, to faithfully seek out unity over division, to work for peace rather than violence, we witness to the mystery of Jesus at work in us and through us. Through our feeble efforts, our failures and our shortcomings, our small victories and our faithful acts, God is at work to bring all things - in heaven and on earth - together in Jesus.

To show the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realms just what God's picture of a world whole and healed looks like.

Where divisions are bridged.

Broken places healed.

Enemies made friends.

And the despised ones into the Beloved ones.

And in this mystery, Jesus invites us to join him. To live as faithful stewards of this gracious mystery.

To practice bringing together and not dividing.

To practice healing rather than harming.

To practice faith and hope in the mystery of Christ, the will of God, and the shape of the church.

The mystery of Christ is not a secret to keep. It's a promise made. That even when we don't understand, even when we don't know how it's possible, even when we doubt our divisions can every truly cease, or that what is broken can ever be mended, God's will has been made known to us - the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure:

In Christ, all things are held together.

In Christ, all things are made whole.

In Christ, all divisions will cease, and the peace of Christ will reign over all the earth.

And that, in Christ, far more can be mended than we know.

May we have the imagination to grasp the beauty and power of this good gospel of Jesus Christ, and may we put it into practice as the church following her Lord.

Let us pray....